

Luther's Lectures on Genesis
and the Formation of Evangelical Identity

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Luther's Lectures *on* Genesis
and the Formation
of Evangelical
Identity

John A. Maxfield

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In memory of my grandfather
George Oliver Lillegard
missionary, pastor, professor of exegesis and Greek,
and preacher on the book of Genesis

CYRRYS ET AFRICA
ISRAEL PERIIT:

AN P P P

Heu heu cyrrus equus tuus
trahet israel. heu heu
Oculis tuis miserum sancte
Luthere Deus

D. M. L.

Deus enim videtur vultu eius



Obijt mense 18 Februarij
in aeterna. hinc 2 et
terrigimus 2 menses postea
in hunc mundum
Et mox...

Johann Reifenstein. Luther Lecturing in 1545. Pen and ink drawing. Photograph courtesy of Stiftung Luthergedenkstätten in Sachsen-Anhalt.

*Spoken words possess an undefinable hidden power,
and teaching that passed directly
from the mouth of the speaker into the ears of the disciples
is more impressive than any other*

—Jerome to Paulinus, Ep. 53 (AD 394)

*After speaking these prayers several times, he was called by God into
the everlasting School and into everlasting joys,
in which he enjoyed the company of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit,
and of all the Prophets and Apostles*

—Philip Melanchthon, *History of the Life and Acts
of the Most Reverend Dr. Martin Luther*

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Acknowledgments

This book grew out of my doctoral dissertation, which was accepted by the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary in May 2004. Like the dissertation that preceded it, the book arrives with many debts. Prior to doctoral studies at Princeton, my study of history and theology was shaped by professors at Gettysburg College, Concordia Theological Seminary, Indiana University, and the Pennsylvania State University. My first introduction to Luther's Genesis lectures was provided by a course of lectures and readings given by Dr. Ulrich Asendorf as a visiting scholar at Concordia Theological Seminary in 1993. During doctoral studies, my research in the lectures was facilitated by two seminars in Luther interpretation by Dr. Scott Hendrix and one on Renaissance historiography and constructions of the past by Dr. Anthony Grafton of Princeton University.

The members of my dissertation committee—Dr. Scott Hendrix, Dr. Paul Rorem, Dr. Anthony Grafton, and, prior to her sabbatical leave, Dr. Elsie McKee—provided careful guidance for my project from the initial proposal through review of the dissertation draft and its revision. I am particularly indebted to the steady stream of constructive criticism and meticulous editorial advice of Dr. Scott Hendrix. I am also grateful to Professor Emeritus Gottfried Seebaß of the University of Heidelberg for providing office space and assistance during the final six months of my dissertation research and writing.

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Truman State University Press project editor Barbara Smith-Mandell offered detailed criticism of the manuscript and concrete suggestions that further improved the work as it moved through another revision prior to final copyediting.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my maternal grandfather, the Rev. George Oliver Lillegard, who devoted his life to the preaching of the gospel and who shaped in his family and parishioners a deeply Lutheran identity, an identity formed in part through his own reading of Luther's Genesis lectures and by preaching on the Genesis narrative at Harvard Street Lutheran Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

A Note on Translations

My study of the Genesis lectures was of course greatly facilitated by the English translation in volumes 1 through 8 of the American edition of *Luther's Works*. I also utilized this edition in quotations, but have revised the translation wherever it seemed appropriate to use a more literal rendering of the syntax and vocabulary of Luther's Latin as given in the critical edition (Weimarer Ausgabe). The frequent use of German phrases in this Latin text, which is lost in the American edition but which appears conspicuously as a bolder type in the original sixteenth-century imprints, is made evident through the use of italics in the quotations, and this is noted in the footnotes. The biblical references that were generously added to the text in the American edition are omitted, except where these are given in the text (and not just the margin) of the Weimar edition, as these reflect the references in the original imprints. To convey in part the way the printed edition of the lectures originally appeared, I have also generally reproduced use of capital letters according to the orthography of the sixteenth-century editions.

My translation of the biblical text of Genesis from the Latin of the Weimar edition is also revised where necessary from the translation given in the American edition. Unless otherwise noted, translations from other modern works or editions in foreign languages are my own.

Abbreviations

MODERN EDITIONS OF LUTHER'S WORKS

- LW* Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*. American Edition. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann. 55 vols. Saint Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1955–86.
- St.A* Luther, Martin. *Studienausgabe*. 6 vols. Edited by Hans-Ulrich Delius. Berlin, later Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1987–99.
- WA* *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Edited by J. F. K. Knaake et al. 65 vols. Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–.
- WA Tr* *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden. 6 vols. Weimar: Böhlau, 1912–21.

TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE

- NKJV* New King James Version. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984.

OTHER WORKS

- CCSL* Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina. 176 vols. Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–.
- CR* *Corpus Reformatorum. Philip Melanthonis opera quae supersunt omnia*. Edited by Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider and Heinrich Ernst Bindseil. 28 vols. Halle, later Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1834–60.

Why the Genesis Lectures?

THE GENESIS LECTURES AND LUTHER'S WORLD OF FAITH

During the last decade of his life, from 1535 to 1545, the German Reformer and University of Wittenberg professor Dr. Martin Luther lectured twice a week, though with some extended interruptions, on the book of Genesis. These lectures were taken down as stenographic notes by several of his students and later edited and published in four volumes beginning in 1544. In his biography of Luther, Heiko A. Oberman wrote that these lectures on Genesis, long ignored by modern researchers because the text was produced from the students' notebooks rather than by the Reformer himself, are worthy of serving "as an introduction to Luther's world of faith."¹

Wrestling with this fascinating and expansive text confirms Oberman's view; this study provides just such an introduction. The object of this study is not to examine the relationship of Luther's interpretation of scripture to his theological discoveries and intellectual development. Nor is it to study the Reformer's hermeneutic principles, his exegesis as it relates to the history of biblical interpretation, or even the theological treasures he mines from the text of the first book of the Bible. Rather, this study is an investigation into Luther's practice of lecturing on the biblical text in the oral and aural environment of his university classroom.

The lectures on Genesis open a window into Luther's lecture hall during the last decade of his life, allowing modern readers to view a sixteenth-century professor engaging his students with the text of scripture

¹Oberman, *Luther*, 166–67.

and using that text to form them spiritually.² In the process, Luther attempted to form in his students a new identity—an Evangelical identity—enabling them to make sense of the rapidly changing society and church in which they were being prepared to serve, primarily as pastors in the developing territorial churches of the Reformation.³ In the later 1520s through the 1540s, the break that had occurred between the papal church and the Reformer (and excommunicated heretic) Martin Luther expanded and solidified to become the major schism within the western Catholic Church that has endured for nearly five hundred years. During the last two decades of his life, Luther was not only ecclesiastically and politically active in leading the Evangelical reform movement centered at Wittenberg; he was also active in shaping the Reformation through his position as professor at the university. Even before Lutheran confessionalization became a political and institutional process, Luther was engaging his students in a theological and intellectual process throughout his career as a professor of Bible that was foundational for the later process of confessionalization.⁴

Luther's Genesis lectures shed light on how he used scripture to instill in his students a worldview that reflected the ideals of the Lutheran Reformation and that, therefore, contributed to the break between Evangelicals and those who remained within the papal church. Although the layers between what Luther actually said in the classroom and what his students wrote down and later edited and published cannot be clearly distinguished, the text of the lectures nevertheless reveals an important connection between the Reformer's mature thought and the emerging identity of confessional Lutheranism.

²Mickey Mattox likewise notes in his study of the Genesis lectures that the published text of the lectures "take[s] us into Luther's classroom, showing both how he tried to shape the faith of the coming generation, and the continuity he saw between his interpretation of the Bible and the premodern traditions of Christian exegesis." Mattox, *Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs*, 10.

³Thus, this study is in the genre of the "history of thought," which Heiko A. Oberman distinguished from intellectual history and defended from its social historian critics by describing it as "the story of how people come to grips, both intellectually and emotionally, with the circumstances and conditions of their life." Oberman, *Reformation: Roots and Ramifications*, 1. Since this book focuses on Luther's thought and activity in the classroom and not on how his students may have appropriated his teaching, identity formation is defined in terms of what Luther was attempting to accomplish in shaping that identity, and shows how Luther's activity as a teacher and aspects of his thought formed an important layer of the background to that process.

⁴For confessionalization as an institutional and political process, see Schilling, "Confessional Europe," and the bibliography given there; see also Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard*, 148–60.

This study uses the term *Evangelical* for the new identity Luther was seeking to form in his students because this was the term most commonly used in sixteenth-century Germany for Luther and his followers. The term is capitalized because in the course of the Reformation, specifically in the 1520s to 1540s, the adjective *evangelical* began to be used as a noun to define a movement and then a group of urban and territorial churches. This evolution of usage is reminiscent of the way the adjective *catholic* (meaning “universal”) changed into a proper noun during the Arian and the Donatist controversies of the fourth century. After those controversies, the term *catholic* no longer meant simply the universal church but came to denote the Catholic Church in its creedal orthodoxy in contrast to the Arian heretics and later its Catholic unity as opposed to the schismatic churches championed by the Donatist party. In the West during the Middle Ages, Catholic orthodoxy and unity were inseparable from the papacy at Rome and the cultural identity of western Christendom as one of the heirs of *Romanitas*, that is, the Roman Empire and its culture.⁵

With the Reformation, this view of Christendom was challenged and the structural unity of the Roman Catholic Church was broken. The term *Evangelical* in the sixteenth century first of all denoted the German Evangelical movement led by Luther and his followers but was broadened to include other reformers who sometimes established different, even competing agendas for the reformation of Christendom.⁶ The term distinguished those who adopted the Reformation from adherents of the papal church, the Roman Catholic Church. It also distinguished the churches of the magisterial Reformation—that is, the Reformation as accepted and put into lawful practice by various German states and cities—from the Anabaptists and other radical movements. When the confessional separation of Lutherans from other Evangelicals became an established fact in the course of the German Reformation, the Evangelical church splintered into Evangelical-Lutheran and Evangelical-Reformed communions, but these terms reflect usage after Luther’s lifetime. For Luther, reformers and their followers who defined themselves in ways other than according to his own understanding of the gospel (including the sacraments) were in no way Evangelicals but were *Schwärmer* or “Sacramentarians,” terms Luther

⁵On the development and cultural identity of western Christendom, see especially Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*; and Herrin, *Formation of Christendom*.

⁶On the agendas for the reformation of Christendom in the sixteenth century, diverse in belief and practice but sharing the common goal of a reinvigorated Christian faith and life, see Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard*.

often used for Anabaptist “fanatics” and those who rejected his traditional belief in the sacrament of the altar as the gift of Christ’s true body and blood for Christians to eat and to drink. The use here of the term *Evangelical*, therefore, focuses on the context of the 1530s and 1540s and on the Evangelical movement led by Luther, with Wittenberg as its center. This use of *Evangelical* should not be confused with later attempts to unite Lutherans with various Reformed churches—either in a union church as in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany or in a generic evangelical Protestantism as in the United States. Nor should use of the term in its sixteenth-century context be confused with its predominant usage in much of Anglo-Christianity today, where *evangelical* usually denotes a conservative Protestantism that has emerged from the revivalism of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain and America.

This use of terms is also quite different from that of Mickey Mattox in his study of Luther’s interpretation of women in the Genesis narrative. His use of the words *catholic* and *evangelical* strictly as adjectives explains a critical difference in interpretation. Mattox provides a detailed study of passages of the Genesis lectures in the context of the history of biblical interpretation, while the present study unveils how the Genesis lectures as a whole reveal the broader contours of Luther’s worldview in the last decade of his life. Mattox concludes that Luther’s interpretation of the women of Genesis was catholic *and* evangelical. By this, he means first of all that Luther’s interpretations were often traditional, revealing engagement with and often acceptance of patristic and medieval interpretations. At the same time, Luther’s interpretations of these narratives clearly bear the marks of his distinctly evangelical theology, which Mattox succinctly terms a “theology of word and faith.”⁷

Without disagreeing with Mattox’s conclusions, this study presents a different perception of what Luther was doing (or attempting to do) in the lecture hall. Luther’s “world of faith”—as revealed in the Genesis lectures—was marked by elements that were radically untraditional. Indeed, Luther’s teachings in his university classroom were hostile to many medieval Catholic traditions of Christian faith and life and to the ecclesiastical structures of the papal church, from which, by the 1530s, he had made a decisive break. This is true, first of all, of the task of biblical exposition, despite the continuities that remain. But more importantly, Luther’s break

⁷Mattox, *Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs*, esp. 14–28, 109–10, 126–27, 135–37, 197–98, 225, 250–52.

with Catholic tradition concerned the very nature of Christian faith—therefore the very nature of Christian life in the present as well as in the past and the future. As he viewed through the mirror of the Genesis narrative his own experience as a Christian whose understanding of the gospel had been rejected and condemned by the papal magisterium, Luther attempted to fashion in his students a new identity, shaped by the interpretive mirror of God’s word. An essential aspect of that identity in the 1530s and 1540s (and later) was that *Catholic* and *Evangelical* were no longer compatible adjectives but incompatible nouns identifying conflicting understandings of Christian faith and life. The terms represented identities in conflict and beliefs worth dying for.⁸

This study uses the text of the lectures to outline the contours of the new identity that Luther laid out through his exposition of Genesis. Those contours structure the chapters of the book: how Luther approached and taught his students to perceive the text of holy scripture; how that text unveiled for Luther the nature of Christian life in the world; and how Luther viewed and taught his students to view the past, the present, and the future of the church and the world through the book of Genesis.

Joseph Lortz once wrote that Luther’s use of language is so powerful that “one is tempted simply to quote him.”⁹ Indeed, Luther’s language is the key that opens the window into his lecture hall. Extensively summarizing details of the lectures and including long quotations provides the reader with an accessible introduction to the older Luther’s world of thought and an understanding of the way Luther used scripture in the exercise of spiritual formation. As Luther himself noted, the text of the Genesis lectures is often rambling and repetitive; it is an oral exercise in the word of God rather than a polished commentary developed for publication. Still, over the course of ten years, hundreds of students, whether they heard only portions of the lectures or the whole, were exposed to central themes that their professor worked and reworked over time. The most important of these themes are brought to the fore in this study in a way that introduces the whole, preserving as much as possible the way Luther developed these themes from the Genesis story.¹⁰

⁸On the willingness of sixteenth-century Christians of various confessions to die for their beliefs at the hands of other Christians, and sometimes to kill in order to protect the civil and ecclesiastical community from the attacks or conscientious objections of dissenters, see Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*.

⁹See also the context of this remark in Lortz, “Basic Elements of Luther’s Intellectual Style,” 5–6.

¹⁰The lectures are a massive work of four folio volumes of Latin text in the original published form (the volumes appearing between 1544 and 1554), three large volumes in the critical edition

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