

Luther on evolution

by Rev. Paul Bartz

Originally published in *Creation magazine*, vol 6, no 3 (February 1984): 18-21.

Abstract

November 10, 1483, Eisleben, Germany, born to Hans and Margaret Luther, a son. November 11, St. Martins Day, the boy was dedicated and named in honour of the day Martin. This same Martin gained his Bachelor's degree in 1502, a Master's degree in 1505 and the Doctorate of Theology at Wittenberg University in 1512. It was this Doctorate which gave Martin Luther the right to teach the Scriptures just as he saw them. On October 31st, 1517, as he nailed his '95 Theses' to the door of his Church, the Protestant Reformation began. Luther's plea was for a return to basic scriptural truths and a study of Luther's writings shows that he regarded creation as one of the foremost of these.

When Luther looked at the text of Genesis concerning creation, he marvelled at Moses' use of simple words and was troubled by the way many commentators and writers had confused the clear scriptural account of creation. He warned those of his day that, 'Among the Hebrews, the Latins or the Greeks, there is no guide whom we can follow with any safety in this area'.¹ I Luther was referring to such men as Lucretius (1st century B.C.) who in his writings on, 'the Nature of the Universe'² attacked concepts central to the biblical story of creation as 'sheer nonsense'. Lucretius stated, 'Nothing can ever be created by divine power out of nothing' ... 'the theory that they (the gods) deliberately created the world in all its natural splendour for the sake of man This theory ... with all its attendant fictions is sheer nonsense!'

Lucretius was a self-declared enemy of Scripture. He said that if the origin of things could be explained without the need for gods, by natural means, people would cease to have fear of right and wrong, and would develop freely, doing and behaving as they desired. Bent on doing just that, Lucretius went into detail on the formation of life from nonlife in a primordial 'soup' and spent a good deal of time explaining the long evolutionary ascent of life from simple to complex. He went into great detail discussing the influence of

environmental factors like food supply on the evolutionary development of new adaptations. Finally, according to Lucretius, life evolved as far as the early ancestors of man, primitive creatures having a 'framework of bigger and solid bones fastened through their flesh to stout sinews.'

These early men did not even know how to use fire, to communicate, or to clothe themselves. They lived only in bushes but, according to this first century B.C. writer, through long generations of physical change the present human race was born from these creatures!³

Luther was well aware of such Roman evolutionists and he rejected their claims.

Luther often cited the creation account as an example of the clarity of Scripture. He accepted the Mosaic authorship of Genesis and that Genesis is the very word of God without qualification. It was his conclusion that the world had not been in existence for more than '6,000 years'⁴, but he stated the philosophers (the evolutionary writers) would never accept that since they work on the basis of human reason which 'is blind, deaf, senseless, godless and sacrilegious in its dealing with all God's words and works . . .'⁵

Two Creation Accounts?

Although many think that the historicity of Genesis and whether it contains two conflicting creation accounts are modern questions, Luther knew the questions and dealt directly with them. He stated in his earthy way that when Moses said something, he meant it. Moses called a spade a spade, as Luther put it. Luther asked, if we cannot understand the meaning of the word 'day' how can we possibly use days in the way God intended us to use them?⁶ Rejecting attempts to explain the six days of creation as accommodations to our limited means of referencing time, he wrote 'One may not use sophistries with reference to this text.'⁷ In one particular argument, Luther made reference to the historicity of Moses' account five times.⁸ He emphasized, 'This, I say, is historical.'⁹

Luther also rejected the idea that Moses' words about creation are a special genre of literature that could be called 'religious history' He had heard that argument already back in his day. Luther's response? ' . . . the statements which Moses has so far made (up to [Genesis 2:9](#)) deal with natural science or with politics or with jurisprudence or with medicine.' So

far, said Luther, Moses hasn't even touched on religion or theology!¹⁰Therefore the creation account could not possibly be a special 'non-literal' 'religious language'.

Alleged discrepancies and errors in the text have long been pointed out. Luther discussed a number of these such as the creation of light before the sun, moon, and stars, and the observation that there were plants before sunlight. Luther answered them by saying that such would-be theologians are 'toying with ill-timed allegories (for Moses is relating history).'¹¹

Luther also rejected the idea that there are two different creation accounts in Genesis. He strongly maintained that chapter two of Genesis is simply a more extended focussing on the details of the creation of man and woman. In ending his comments on the first chapter, Luther said: 'In the next (chapter) Moses will give more information about the work of the sixth day, how man was created.'¹² Luther repeated this same thought, rejecting the two-account idea quite a number of times.¹³ [Editor's note: see also [Genesis contradictions?](#)] Luther stressed that the Word was God's instrument of creation, the very same Word which became flesh to win our salvation.¹⁴ On this basis, for Luther, the teaching about the 'how' of creation is also part of the Scriptural revelation of Christ. He saw toying with creation as toying with Scripture's revelation about Christ. For this reason, Luther even rejected St. Augustine's approach of allegoriation, which he considered too evasive, philosophical and general on the question of the biblical record of creation. Commenting on Augustine's methods, he wrote, 'I ask you, dear reader, what need is there of those obscure and most foolish allegories when this light is so very clear ... Do they not smother the true meaning and replace it with an idea which is not merely useless but disastrous? ... For we have the Holy Spirit as our Guide. Through Moses, He does not give us foolish allegories, but He teaches us about most important events.'¹⁵

Bible and Science

Luther did not consider true science should be at odds with Scripture. Rather than fear science, Luther felt that true science, where it touched a subject revealed in Scripture, could be expected to complement it. Science which was at odds with Scripture was therefore false science. While science deals only with that part of the creation which can be apprehended by the senses, Scripture deals with major aspects for both the visible and invisible parts of creation. Scripture therefore is a greater authority than science, he argued.

Martin Luther's grasp of the scientific method was far ahead of his time. He noted that in Astrology only the predictions which did not fail were published, while the others were forgotten. He did not believe 'that from such partial observations a science can be established.'¹⁶ Luther was advocating the basic scientific method of complete and repeatable observation, and falsifiability.

Luther clearly endorsed proper scientific methodology in the form of empirical observation to establish scientific principles. To this, he added that exceptions to scientific principles as indicated by Scripture are possible according to God's purposes. God did not 'wind up' the world and let it run on its own. He is always personally involved, the highest expression of His personal, daily involvement in His creation being found in His grace in Christ. In raising the text of Scripture to the level of highest authority in all things, and using reason as a servant captive to Scripture, Luther preshadowed the very principles upon which modern science was founded—and we ought not to forget it was founded by creationists. There can be no doubt that evolutionist science had departed a long way from this basis.

Theistic Evolution

Luther scorned theistic evolution, which was known among the educated of his day: 'It is not true,' he wrote, 'as several heretics and other vulgar persons allege, that God created everything in the beginning, and then let nature take its own independent course, so that all things now spring into being of their own power; thereby they put God on a level with a shoemaker or a tailor. This not only contradicts scripture, but it runs counter to experience'¹⁷.

Aware of the scientific claims, Luther also stated: 'Just as no creature was able to contribute towards its own creation at the beginning, so it has not been able to work towards its preservation and the perpetuation of its kind. Thus, as we human beings did not create ourselves, so we can do nothing to keep ourselves alive for a single moment by our own power.'¹⁸

Luther's words rejecting chance and mechanistically guided processes to explain man are as specific and clear as if he had read Darwin. In his comments on [Genesis 1:6](#) he states, 'Here we are taught about the beginning of man, that the first man did not come into existence by a process of generation as reason had deceived Aristotle and the philosophers into imagining.'¹⁹ His clear rejection of any and all chance processes to explain the world, came

from his observation that scripture has clearly ruled these explanations out. 'Ungodly and wicked men, who suppose that everything happens by chance, understanding nothing in the Holy Scriptures and creatures of God.'²⁰ There can be little doubt that Luther was familiar with the classic basics of evolution. There can be no doubt that he thoroughly rejected them.

Creation—Christ

The heart of Luther's objections to evolution can be found in his commitment to the Gospel. Man was specially made by God for fellowship with Him. Through God's grace, the Gospel restores that fellowship to fallen man—a fellowship which includes God's daily and personal interaction in our individual lives. He is not the kind of God who would turn us over to His created laws. Such a thought was an attack upon grace itself! For this reason, Luther considered the biblical teaching on creation part of the biblical Christology. Citing the apostle John, Luther said, 'If Christ is not true and natural God born of the Father in eternity and Creator of all creatures, we are doomed.'²¹ In other words, talking about creation without Christ's intimate involvement, or discussing creation as a superfluous doctrine is a subtle but effective form of taking Christ away from Christianity.

Luther rejected the idea that creation continues after the sixth day in the conception of new generations. He said '... in God's sight I was begotten and multiplied immediately when the world began, because this Word, and God said, 'Let us make man', created me too. Whatever God wanted to create, that He created then when He spoke. Not everything has come into view at once.'²² Contrary to some modern writers, Luther thus distinguished very carefully between God's creative work (which ended on the sixth day), and God's preservation of His creation (which follows different principles and which continues today). In his comments on the first two verses of the Gospel of John, Luther stated that these verses clearly tie Christ, His divinity, and the Genesis creation account together for all time. One, he said, cannot be unravelled without unravelling the other.²³ Luther's concern for right faith on creation was therefore concern for salvation. He put it this way: 'If faith is impaired or injured even in the least, we are lost. And if Christ is divested of His divinity there remains no help against God's wrath and no rescue from His judgment.'²⁴ But, 'Having been made a Christian, then, he is one who should serve his Creator. Outside of these resources of ours, there is nothing. We have not created, formed and made ourselves, but we have everything from God.'²⁵

For Luther, creation was very much an issue. Luther rejected the evolutionary beliefs of the ancients, and the theistic evolution of the then 'modern' theologians before him. To Luther the biblical teaching on creation is the clearest of teachings, to be understood literally, and to be understood as a crucial part of the biblical teaching on the person and work of Christ. And scriptural teaching is to be lord even over science!

Luther, after whom the Lutheran Church is named, would be saddened by the many theologians, educators and educational institutions bearing the name Lutheran which today propagate that which he despised—evolution. The world should know that those 'vulgar persons' who currently call themselves Lutheran, but accept theistic evolution, would get a good thrashing from Luther were he to catch up with them!

References

1. J.P. Pelikan and H. Lehmann, ed., 'Luther's Works' American Edition, 55 Volumes, Volume 1, 'Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1-5' St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1955, p.1, hereafter abbreviated as L.W.
2. THE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE, translated by R. E. Latham, Penguin Books, Baltimore, Maryland 1967, pp. 31 ff.
3. Ibid pp. 199-200.
4. L.W., Vol. 1. page 3.
5. MARTIN LUTHER, ON THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL, translated by J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston, Westwood, N.J., Revell, 1957, p. 201.
6. L.W., Vol. 1, p.5.
7. L.W., Vol. 1, p.69.
8. L.W., Vol. 1, pp. 88-90.
9. L.W., Vol. 1, p.94.
10. L.W., Vol. 1, p.19.
11. L.W., Vol. 1, p.73.
12. L.W., Vol. 1, pp. 69, 82, 140.
13. L.W., Vol. 1, pp. 3,31,75, Vol. 2, p.16, Vol. 5, p. 249, as a few examples.
14. L.W., Vol. 1, pp. 184-185.
15. L.W., Vol. 1, pp. 44-45.
16. L.W., Vol. 22, pp. 28-29.
17. L.W., Vol. 22, p. 28.
18. L.W., Vol. 1, p. 25.
19. L.W., Vol. 4, p. 249.

20. L.W., Vol. 22, p. 21.
21. L.W., Vol. 1, p. 76.
22. L.W., Vol. 22, p. 13-14.
23. L.W., Vol. 22, p. 22.
24. L.W., Vol. 17, p. 91.