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Luther on Scientific Questions

An extract from an extended review of Luther's LECTURES ON GENESIS, LUTHER'S WORKS (edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. Concordia, St. Louis, 1958), Vol. I, as presented to the Pastoral Conference of Central Illinois District, Springfield, Illinois, September 1-3, 1959.

FRED KRAMER

IN DEALING with the Mosaic account of the creation, Luther was bound to touch upon scientific questions. It is most interesting to see how he handles them. In some respects one is inclined to find Luther exceedingly modern, while in others he was a child of his time. One must remember that Copernicus, with whom began great developments in scientific thought, was a contemporary of Luther, and that his theories were too new to have been evaluated dispassionately by the theologians of either Roman Catholicism or Protestantism. Consequently, one is not surprised to find very immature opinions on some scientific questions in Luther, while one may at other times be overwhelmed by the extent of his insight and understanding.

THE FIRMAMENT

Speaking in connection with Genesis 1, 6, about the waters above the firmament, Luther says: "But what is the most remarkable is that Moses clearly makes three divisions. He places the firmament in the middle, between the waters. I might readily imagine that the firmament is the uppermost mass of all and that the waters which are in suspension, not over but under the heavens, are the clouds which we observe, so that the waters separated from the waters would be understood as the clouds which are separated from our waters on the earth. But Moses says in plain words that the waters were above and below the firmament. Here I, therefore, take my reason captive and subscribe to the word even though I do not understand it." (Page 26).

THE SEAS

In discussing the third day of the creation Luther does not appear to face the problem of the great distances which the waters

had to travel in connection with the drainage of the earth. However, he shows a far deeper insight than some later exegetes when he says, "It is very certain that the sea is far higher than the earth. God, up to the present time, commands the waters to remain in suspension and restrains them by His word lest they burst upon us as they burst forth in the deluge. But at times God gives providential signs, and entire islands perish by water, to show that the sea is in His hands and that He can either hold it in check or release it against the ungrateful and the evil." (Page 35).

DIET

He discusses the question of diet in connection with the work of the third day. "You see also what sort of food He provided for us, namely, herbs and fruits of the trees. Hence I believe that our bodies would have been far more durable if the practice of eating all sorts of food—particularly, however, the consumption of meat—had not been introduced after the deluge. Even though the earth was cursed after Adam's sin and later on, at the time of the deluge, had also become very corrupt, nevertheless, a diet of herbs rather than of meat would be far finer today. Indeed, it is clear that at the beginning of the world herbs served as food and were created for this use, that they might be food for man." (Page 36).

LIGHT

Luther is aware of the difficulty Bible students find in the account of the fourth day, where we are told that God created the sun, moon, and stars, whereas light itself had already been created on the first day. On this point he says: "Here, then it is asked concerning this first light whether it disappeared again after the sun and the moon were created or remained with the sun. Here there is a great variety of ideas and opinions. I for my part indeed simply believe that the procedure of all the works of God is the same. Thus on the first day a crude heaven and a crude earth were created and then perfected and made elegant, so that the heaven might be expanded and adorned with light and that the earth, after it was brought forth from the waters, might be clad with trees and herbs. So I believe that the incipient, and, as it were, crude light of the first day was perfected by the addition of new creatures; the sun, moon, the stars, etc." (Page 40).

ASTRONOMY

Being a child of his times, Luther had a very primitive idea of the heavenly bodies and their movements. It is known from other writings of Luther that he did not sympathize with Copernicus or his new theory, that the earth revolves, while the heavens, in a manner, stand still. Having mentioned that the philosophers have all kinds of theories which cannot be proved, he says: "Indeed, it is more likely that the bodies of the stars, like that of the sun, are round, and that they are fastened to the firmament like globes of fire, to shed light at night, each according to its endowment and its creation." (Page 42).

But while Luther had primitive ideas concerning astronomy, nobody could sell him the extravagant claims of the astrologers. On this point he says: "So far as this matter is concerned, however, I shall never be convinced that astrology should be numbered among the sciences. And I shall adhere to this opinion because astrology is without proof. The appeal to experience has no effect on me. All the astrological experiences are purely individual cases. The experts have taken note of and recorded only those instances which did not fail; but they took no note of the rest of the attempts, where they were wrong and the results which they predicted as certain did not follow. Aristotle says that one swallow does not make a spring, and so I do not believe that from such partial observation a science can be established." (Page 45).

SPONTANEOUS GENERATION?

Luther had some ideas which might have pleased evolutionists. In discussing the creation of animals, Luther says among other things: "Here questions are raised also about the mice and the dormice, whence they originate and how. Indeed, we have learned from experience that not even ships which are continually floating on the sea are safe from mice. Likewise, no house can be so thoroughly clean that no mice are produced in it. We can also inquire about the manner in which flies come into existence. Likewise, where the birds go in the fall.

"But so far as mice are concerned, Aristotle states that certain animals are produced by their like, or else by their unlike. Thus

mice belong to the kind produced by their unlike, because mice originate not from mice alone but also from decay, which is used up and gradually turns into a mouse.

"If you should ask by what power such a generation takes place, Aristotle has the answer that decayed moisture is kept warm by the heat of the sun and that in this way a living being is produced, just as we see dung beetles being brought into existence from horse manure. I doubt that this is a satisfactory explanation. The sun warms; but it would bring nothing into being unless God said by His divine power: 'Let a mouse come out of the decay.' Therefore the mouse, too, is a divine creature, and in my judgment, of a watery nature and, as it were, a land bird; otherwise it would have the form of a monster, and its kind would not be preserved. But for its kind it has a very beautiful form—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. Therefore here, too, we admire God's creation and workmanship. The same thing may be said about flies." (Pages 51-52).

While it might seem here that Luther believed in spontaneous generation, it is clear that he would not divorce this from God and His creating Word.

BIRDS

There follows a strange paragraph about birds, which should, I believe, be taken not as an indication that Luther was a poor observer, and ignorant, but rather as an indication of the poor state of biological science in general in Luther's time. Luther was a child of his times, and shared in the misconception and ignorance of the time. The paragraph follows: "About birds I surely have no knowledge. It is not likely that they go to regions lying more toward the south, inasmuch as from experience it has been learned that the swallows lie dead in the waters throughout the winter and return to life at springtime. This is truly a weighty proof of our resurrection. Therefore I think that birds are preserved in trees or in waters. These works of the Divine Majesty are plainly miraculous. So we see them, and yet we do not understand them. But I think that even if someday a species should perish (but I doubt that this can happen), it would nevertheless be replaced by God." (Page 52).

FISH

Similarly Luther had what would today be considered an unscientific view of the manner in which ponds are stocked with fish. He says, "We see that the Word to this day is effective until now because fish are brought into existence directly out of the water. Ponds and lakes generate fish, since we see that carps have been brought forth in ponds in which there were none before. The tall story is told that fish caught by birds had dropped their seed into ponds and lakes while they were being carried along in the air and that fish then grew in the waters. To me this does not seem likely. But the sole and true reason is that here the water is commanded to bring forth fish. This Word is still effective and brings about these results." (Page 54).

Biologists today would probably tell us that the carp got into the ponds where there were none before via the legs and feathers of king-fishers and other water birds that swam in a pond where the fertilized eggs of carp were swimming on the surface, and clung to the legs and feathers of waterfowls, who then migrated to the ponds in which there were no carp, and left the eggs there, to give the carp a chance in the new pond.

SOME SURPRISINGLY MODERN ATTITUDES

While Luther's understanding of science was necessarily limited, and much that he knew, both true and false, had come to him somehow via Aristotle, the astute Greek observer, Luther had some surprisingly modern attitudes with respect to science. Speaking of the language of the Holy Spirit, Luther is by no means ready to deny to the scientist a right to his own language and terminology: "Thus we see that the Holy Spirit also has His own language and way of expression, namely, that God, by speaking created all things and worked through the Word, and that all His works are some Words of God's created by the uncreated Word. Therefore just as a philosopher employs his own terms, so the Holy Spirit, too, employs His. An astronomer, therefore, does right when he uses the terms spheres, apsides, and epicycles; they belong to his profession and enable him to teach others with greater ease. By way of contrast, the Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture know nothing

about those designations and call the entire area above us 'heaven'. Nor should an astronomer find fault with this; let each of the two speak in his own terminology.

"So also the word *time* must be understood in this passage. Time does not have the same meaning for the Hebrew and the philosopher; but for the Hebrew the word time denotes theologically fixed festivals, likewise intervals of days which make up a year. For this reason it is translated almost everywhere with the noun *feast*, or festival, except when the text deals with the tabernacle. I consider this warning to be placed before we proceed, and I believe that this method is useful: every science should make use of its own terminology, and one should not for this reason condemn the other or ridicule it; but one should rather be of use to the other, and they should put their achievements at one another's disposal. This is what craftsmen do to maintain the whole city which, as Aristotle says, cannot be composed of a physician and another physician, but of a physician and a farmer." (Pages 47-48).

CHANGES IN THE CREATION

There was a time in the theological world when it was almost a mark of orthodoxy for a person to deny that changes had taken place in the creation. This was suspected of being evolutionistic. Luther assumes many and sweeping changes in the creation, both in connection with the fall into sin, and in connection with the Deluge. While he appears to be uncertain whether the thorns and thistles that were threatened Adam after the fall were due to a change in the creation, or actually represented a new creation, he knows of great changes in the animal world. Speaking in particular of the serpent Luther says: "However, after sin it was only the beauty of the serpent that was changed—for God threatens that it will creep on the earth, while previously it walked erect, like a rooster, and that it will eat earth, while previously it lived on the better fruits—but also that freedom from fear has been lost for we flee from serpents just as serpents, in turn, flee from us." . . . "This is my idea about the natural serpent, which Satan wanted to misuse and which at that time was a most beautiful little beast, without the poisonous tail and without those ugly scales; for these were added after sin." (Page 151-152).

Luther assumes that the changes which came over the creation as a result of the fall into sin involved not only the serpent, but even mankind: "From this some obvious conclusions follow: that before sin the serpent was the most beautiful little animal and most pleasing to man, as little mules, sheep, and puppies are today; however, that it walked upright. And so it is due to the curse and not to its nature that it now creeps on the ground." (Page 186).

Luther returns to this subject of the changes wrought in the creation by sin again and again: "Moreover, it appears here what a great misfortune followed sin, because the earth, which is innocent and committed no sin, is nevertheless compelled to endure the curse, and, as St. Paul says, Rom. 8 v. 20, 'has been subjected to vanity.' But it will be free from this on the Last Day, for which it is waiting. Pliny calls the earth a kind, gentle, and forbearing mother; likewise, the perpetual servant of the need of mortals. But, as Paul points out, the earth itself feels its curse. In the first place, it does not bring forth the good things it would have produced if man had not fallen. In the second place, it produces many harmful plants, which it would not have produced, such as darnel, wild oats, weeds, nettles, thorns and thistles. Add to these the poisons, the injurious vermin, and whatever else there is of this kind. All these were brought in through sin.

"I have no doubt that before sin the air was purer and more healthful, and the water more prolific; yes, even the sun's light was even more beautiful and clearer. Now the entire creation in all its parts reminds us of the curse that was inflicted because of sin. Nevertheless, there have remained some remnants of the former blessings, namely, that the earth is, as it were, forced to work hard to yield those things that are necessary for our use, although they are marred by thorns and thistles, that is, by useless and even harmful trees, fruits, and herbs, which the wrath of God sows." (Pages 204-205).

Luther evidently also assumed that the trees suffered a change as a result of sin: "Here it is also asked when the fruitless or sterile trees were created, likewise the sterile herbs. Although I have no conclusive answer, I shall nevertheless give my opinion. I think that in the beginning all trees were good and productive and that the beasts of the field, together with Adam, had a common table,

as it were, and lived on rye, wheat, and other higher products of nature. There was also the greatest abundance of all creatures.

"But only after Adam's sin was it said to the earth that it should produce thorns and thistles. There is no doubt, therefore, that it also is a punishment for sin that we have so many trees and herbs which have no use as food." (Page 38).

THE FLOOD

Though Luther does not discuss the Flood, *ex professo*, in Vol. 1, he dwells on this subject a number of times, also in discussing changes which took place in earth after the creation. He believes that the Flood destroyed the Paradise which Genesis describes, and that it brought a host of other changes to the creation. We quote at length: "Hence my opinion, which I also pointed out above, is, first, that Paradise was closed to man by sin, and, secondly, that it was utterly destroyed and annihilated by the Flood, so that no trace of it is visible any longer. For, as I also said above, I am fully of the opinion that after Adam's fall Paradise remained in existence and was known to his descendants, but was inaccessible to them because of the Angel who kept watch over the Garden with his flaming sword, as the text states. But the flood laid everything waste, just as it is written that all the fountains and abysses were torn open. Who, then, would doubt that these sources, too, were rent and thrown into confusion? And so, just as there are mountains after the Flood where previously there were fields and a lovely plain, so undoubtedly there are now springs where there were none before, and vice versa. For the entire surface of the earth was changed. I have no doubt that there are remains of the Flood, because where there are now mines, there are commonly found pieces of petrified wood. In the stones themselves there appear various forms of fish and other animals. Thus I believe that before the Flood the Mediterranean Sea was not surrounded by land but that the channel in which it now has its place was produced for it by the Flood. Likewise, the area of the Red Sea without a doubt was formerly a fertile plain, and, as is likely, some part of this Garden. So also the remaining gulfs, the Persian, the Arabian, and so forth, consist of remnants of the Flood . . .

"Moreover, God's practice has always been this: whenever He punishes sin, He also curses the earth. Therefore in Zephaniah He threatens that He will gather up the fish of the sea and birds of the heaven. Similarly, in our age many streams have fewer fish than they had within the memory of our ancestors. The birds are less abundant, etc. A statement appears in Isaiah 13:19-22 about Babylon also, for when people are carried away, the beast of the field also depart, and nothing remains except monsters and harmful wild beasts. Similarly, the Land of Canaan, once more fertile, is now said to be full of barrenness, as Psalm 107:34 threatens. If this happens in the instance of particular punishment, what shall we imagine was effected by that universal punishment?" (Pages 98-99).