

Luther and the Form Critics: Touching the Tears of Moses
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In this brief paper I simply use Luther's reading of Genesis to push those who read through form-critical lenses, through historical-critical lenses, and through suchlike lenses, to wonder a bit, and perhaps in a different way, about what they are doing with the text of Genesis.

In this paper I will not set forth all the weaknesses of a form-critical reading of the bible, but after you read this brief compilation of some of Luther's ways of reading, you will, I think, at times pause at a place where the way the text is written strikes you, in your form-critical or literary-critical or historical-critical reading patterns, and wonder.

Whether we read in the sixteenth century or now, the questions are often the same. Why does the text seem to break off here? What is the intent of the editors in shifting the argument or the subject matter, or the person, so suddenly? Why the arbitrary arrangement? Why this "political" insertion, and/or this "political" deletion? Wherefore this interpolation? Is there here repetition because the writer desires to make a stronger political point? Something seems to have been excised here, was it to make Abraham look better? What was the redactor's motive in phrasing it this way? Can in any way I speak of the "unity of the narrative" in this passage? What is a text?

Many wonder. Valiquette describes postmodern approaches to these sorts of question as those that look for inconsistencies that "betray the author."¹ The same could be said for literary, form criticism and similar approaches. But nevertheless, scholars in all these domains, in moments of innocence, confess to a distress over reason and language. Carmichael, for example, has it that "One cannot really argue against many such attempts to postulate old rules [to explain the text, or discrepancies in the text] for the simple reason that there is no historical evidence open to evaluation."² Keller has it beautifully in conversation with Derrida that "theology is always trembling", having its own "lost irony" and "haunting uncertainty" as well as its "politico-messianic hopes."³ These distresses tend to undermine the assumptions of form criticism; it, for the most part assumes that what was most important to an author and/or author community, for whatever reasons (articulable reasons) they could and did relate.

It can be thought, however, that one might slightly shift the question from a focus on the author or author community's relationship to the audience community to the author's relationship with his subject matter and his God, especially as that relationship makes itself visible in the words we see on the page as traces.

¹ Valiquette, Hilaire Paul "Exodus-Deuteronomy as Discourse: Models, Distancing, Provocation, Paraenesis" *JSOT* (1999) 85:48

² Carmichael, Calum *Law and Narrative in the Bible: The Evidence of the Deuteronomic Laws and the Decalogue* (Cornell 1985) 15

³ The larger quote, which breathes after it a thank you to deconstruction: "Theology is always trembling" being "embarrassed by the oscillations, we [theologians] have (unlike biblical scholars) tended to disavow the apocalypse and the doubt. So no wonder some of us are grateful for the mysterious resonances of deconstruction with our own lost irony, with our haunting uncertainty, and more recently, with our politico-messianic hopes" (Catherine Keller and Stephen D Moore "Derridapocalypse" in *Derrida and Religion* (Routledge 2005) 189

We might ask questions about God and the subject matter, as well as the possibility or means of making those matters manifest in language that does not haunt. To do this, we take up Luther, who tends to move more closely toward these questions than moderns.

As we review some of Luther's views on certain passages in Genesis in light of these questions, we should keep in mind that Luther did strongly believe that the Holy Spirit was the writer of the book. But, probably because the bible doesn't say "the Holy Spirit wrote" but that the "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21), Luther did not sweat over the words "spake as they were moved" and what they mean or don't mean in relationship to the holy man holding the pen, he simply interchanges the terms; at times he has "Moses here writes" and in the next breath "here the Holy Spirit writes," with no discernable pattern. So for the purposes of this paper we will do the same practice and we won't solve the "meaning" of what that part in Peter means, either for Peter, Moses, redactors, Hezekiah's school, or any other people; that is, we won't try to rephrase it in attempts to elucidate it better, in any other phrase than that with which it is phrased. And to read Luther, we must take it in a simple way for understanding Luther's views on how the text of Genesis came to be: "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake [as they were] moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21).

Luther's lectures on Genesis were done later in his life, from the late 1530s until the early 1540s by most reckonings; he lectured to young ministers-in-training and notes were taken on his lectures; they run to eight volumes in English.

In these lectures, what Luther does at times in his interpretation of Genesis is to read the heart of Moses. And he is not reading a record, of Moses' transgressions, or decisions Moses has made, or reasoning, as God often does, who "looketh on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7) of every man; rather Luther is as if taking us back to a certain moment in time when Moses held the pen; and when we go there we find that Moses is not a calm relayer of information. Moses may be an instrument through which God speaks, which is certainly what Luther believed him to have been, but he is a weeping, trembling instrument, capable even of laying down his pen in stricken silence due to overwhelming anguish, joy or fear. Thus what Luther does at times in his act of reading Moses is to deeply feel, to empathize, to be stirred, himself, unto sympathetic emotion, as one is who has been met at the door by a sobbing neighbor. For in reading Moses, Luther doesn't so much mark facts down and enter them into his store of things to do or remember so much as have an emotional experience, a lifting up, a stirring, the way one feels after having walked and deeply discussed with a friend. And it is this experience that Luther often refers to, in him, and in Moses to explain the way the text appears as it does.

It is impossible, for the most part, to look at the words of a text and not wonder, if the words look so emotional, so frantic—is it because the writer was "trying to convey the feeling of emotion" or is it because the writer was himself in an emotional torment? Can both be true? For we can probably safely say that even if one is only detachedly trying to convey a feeling, he has to have some level of empathy with that feeling to be able to adequately convey it. It cannot be proven, we can probably safely say, what the emotions were of the writer when he wrote, exactly, but for the sake of foregrounding something needing foregrounding, we will ask ourselves to ask this question that touches motives.

We speak here of emotion, but political-historical interpretations obviously relate to the same lenses of interpretation. For interpretation, it is not about language, or language's transparency. The idea never surfaced to Luther, at least not in modern phraseology and nor connotative of things with which moderns concern themselves, that un-hearted language, or language that does not come always under consideration along with a heart, had the capacity to treat the subject or be the vehicle by which the subject treats us. Hamlet, with wounded name, wishes Horatio to tell his, Hamlet's, story. For, otherwise, things will stand unknown. But the condition given, that which is must necessarily be true in Horatio before Horatio can tell the story, is "if thou didst ever hold me in thy heart"⁴; has he? He needs to, to be able to adequately tell the story, to interpret, to read and comprehend; from the heart's deep ground come the emotions and motives; who can separate them? The question is a good one, because it asks us about bible interpretation: how, when seeing a few words on a page, wondering what they say, why, why they are phrased that way and not another, does one get to the interpretation; that is, does one get to the heart of the matter in the text?

In the first few verses of the seventh chapter of Genesis, the text is very repetitive. The numbers of beasts, what kind, the fowls, male and female, the reasons for the preservation—these are all given, in a seemingly useless way, filling probably three times more space in the text than the brief space given for the reason Noah was saved "Noah found grace in the sight of the Lord" (Gen. 6:8). Why the profusion of words? Why the detailed description of the animals, the mixing up of the two by two and the sevens? Why give the dimensions of the ark? Luther would answer simply: because God enjoys talking to Noah⁵. God has a friendly nature, and he finds enjoyment talking to Noah, so the repetition gives God a chance to talk more than he might otherwise talk, and spend more time in friendly visiting with Noah. Contrast a discussion about whether the text appears as it does so or not with one which rather occupies itself with "the role of tense, aspect, particles, affixes, pronominalization chains, paraphrase, and conjunctions in providing cohesion and prominence in a discourse; ways of marking peak in a narrative; and the function of dialogue in discourse."⁶

And according to Luther, this is not always why things are repeated. For sometimes Moses repeats things, such things as I might very much wonder why they were stated or even stated and repeated, such things as exactly which month the fountains of the great deep were open, what kinds of birds, how the water came, increased, overflowed. But these, Luther says, are in such disarray and seeming confusion simply because Moses' heart is exceedingly perplexed. And not only that, but another heart is also disturbed, the heart of the one about whom Moses writes, Noah, with whom Luther seems to assume Moses had a relationship exactly as he, Luther, has one with Moses. Luther states that these words appear on the page as they do also in part because the "heart of Noah himself, who was filled with the Holy Spirit, was burning with love, and was almost overcome by his emotion over the coming disaster"⁷. Thus, Moses' writing, when we

⁴ *Hamlet* 5:2:346-351

⁵ Luther, Martin *Luther's Works* (English translation), ed. J. Pelikan and HT Lehman, 55 vols (Concordia 1955-76) Vol 2, p 88; hereinafter *LW* 2:88

⁶ Longacre, Robert "The Discourse Structure of the Flood Narrative" *Society of Biblical Literature 1976 Seminar Papers*, ed. G. MacRae (Scholars 1976) 235-62

⁷ *LW* 2:91

look at it, looks wordy, and without point, repetitive. But Moses is here so wordy, whereas he is often otherwise seemingly succinct, because, though his wordiness seems purposeless “to empty-headed and dull readers”, in fact, they “impel us to fear God and bring us face to face with what is going on, in order that after we have been disheartened by the thought of such great wrath, we may begin to fear God in earnest and cease to sin.” For so felt Moses himself: “Moses seems to have written these words with a profusion of tears”⁸.

At other times, Moses is wordy because he wants to show joy. For after the flood, Moses wants to portray that the survivors’ “hearts were intoxicated with joy”⁹; one reading those short verses in Genesis 8 describing this (verses 18- 22), should probably use this knowledge of the intoxication of joy in Noah and his family as well as probably the sympathetic joy of Moses, in understanding why the words are as they are and appear so as they do.

At other times, Moses, who has called somebody by name for a time, discontinues the use of that to describe the person. Why? In at least one case, because of hatred. For if we asked Luther, why does the Holy Spirit fail to mention Ham’s name again (Genesis 9:24-27), calling him “Canaan” and “younger son”, after Ham’s sin against his father Noah? Because “the Holy Spirit hates it”¹⁰.

In another place, Luther gives his view on how Moses shows the ground of Abraham’s heart and agitated state in Genesis 18, as Abraham argues over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Here, the reader of the text might conclude many things from the hesitating, the breaking off, the relentless repetition and drive from 50 righteous to 45 to 40 and on down. But Luther concludes that these words appear so because: “it is Abraham’s very great emotion and his consternation, so to speak, which impel him to say foolish things”¹¹. Indeed, the consternation is so great that things which might have been written could not even be expressed. For Abraham sees that the whole 5 cities are to be destroyed, and thus, there were more things in Moses’ heart, but they are not there in the bible text, because this situation “cannot be adequately lamented or expressed in words”.¹²

So either the bible character, the writer, or the Holy Spirit—it is actually their feelings, their capacity or incapacity for using language to describe the matters at hand—to these I am look to trace the reason for my seeing words (or not seeing them) in a certain order on the page of the bible before me. If one reads as Luther, then when one reads the words about Laban’s welcoming of Abraham’s servant into his home, and considers how the text appears on the page, one feels that “the Holy Spirit seems to delight in recounting this”.¹³ The situation was similar in Genesis 21:1 “And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken.” Here “Moses is very wordy” probably because he desires to impress upon the reader that “most exuberant joy of the saintly patriarch”.¹⁴

⁸ LW 2:96

⁹ LW 2:115

¹⁰ LW 2:174

¹¹ LW 3:235

¹² LW 3:295

¹³ LW 4:282

¹⁴ LW 4:4

The Holy Ghost, the most perfect and best writer, and best rhetorician,¹⁵ simply fails at times. I am left looking at the page, the words there, and wondering, and from it I am to conclude, that there is something there, there is something more, but words could not be found, or do not exist to describe it, so there is silence¹⁶. Or there is confusion in me, the reader, concerning the disorderliness of the text—but this is simply because of the emotions of the heart of the writer, and of the one about whom he writes. It is too deep, perhaps because, as Nietzsche had it: “The ‘kingdom of heaven’ is a state of the heart.”¹⁷ But could I touch the tears of Moses, could I obey Hamlet, I could also both tell the dream, and the interpretation thereof. For when Moses writes of Abraham going to sacrifice Isaac, as I read it, I should keep those tears of Moses in mind:

Up to this point Moses has described the example of obedience of both, the father as well as the son, in a long narrative and has kept the reader in suspense to the point of weariness with extraordinary expectation. Now that the altar has been built and the epiphany has come, Moses has nothing to say. He either does not venture to state what took place, because the subject matter is greater than can be expressed by any eloquence, or his tears made it impossible for him to write. He lets the amazement and surprise remain in the hearts of his readers and wants them to form their own idea of a situation which he is unable to describe adequately with words.... Because certainly Isaac was here dumbstruck, and asked his father to consider what had been said about him, and wished to talk the matter over, all this should have been recorded here. I do not know why Moses omitted it. But I have no doubt that the father’s address to his son was extraordinary.¹⁸

¹⁵ Luther, Martin *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527) (Concordia 1969) 16:117. (WA XXXI-2, 83,84) [“This chapter does not cohere with the preceding ones, as it seems, since it treats of a different subject. But the ability to recognize the coherence of the prophets is important. For the prophets did not speak as drunk and raving men, mixing diverse subjects together. But the Holy Spirit is the best rhetorician and logician, and therefore he speaks most clearly.”]

¹⁶ Which does not necessarily have to mean closed, if we follow the deconstructionists “The absolute secret is absolutely close, absolutely clothed, but as such infinitely open” Catherine Keller and Stephen D Moore “Derridapocalypse” in *Derrida and Religion* (Routledge 2005) 192

¹⁷ Nietzsche, Friedrich “The Antichrist” in *The Portable Nietzsche*. Walter Kaufmann (tr). (Viking 1969) 608

¹⁸ LW 4:112-113

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