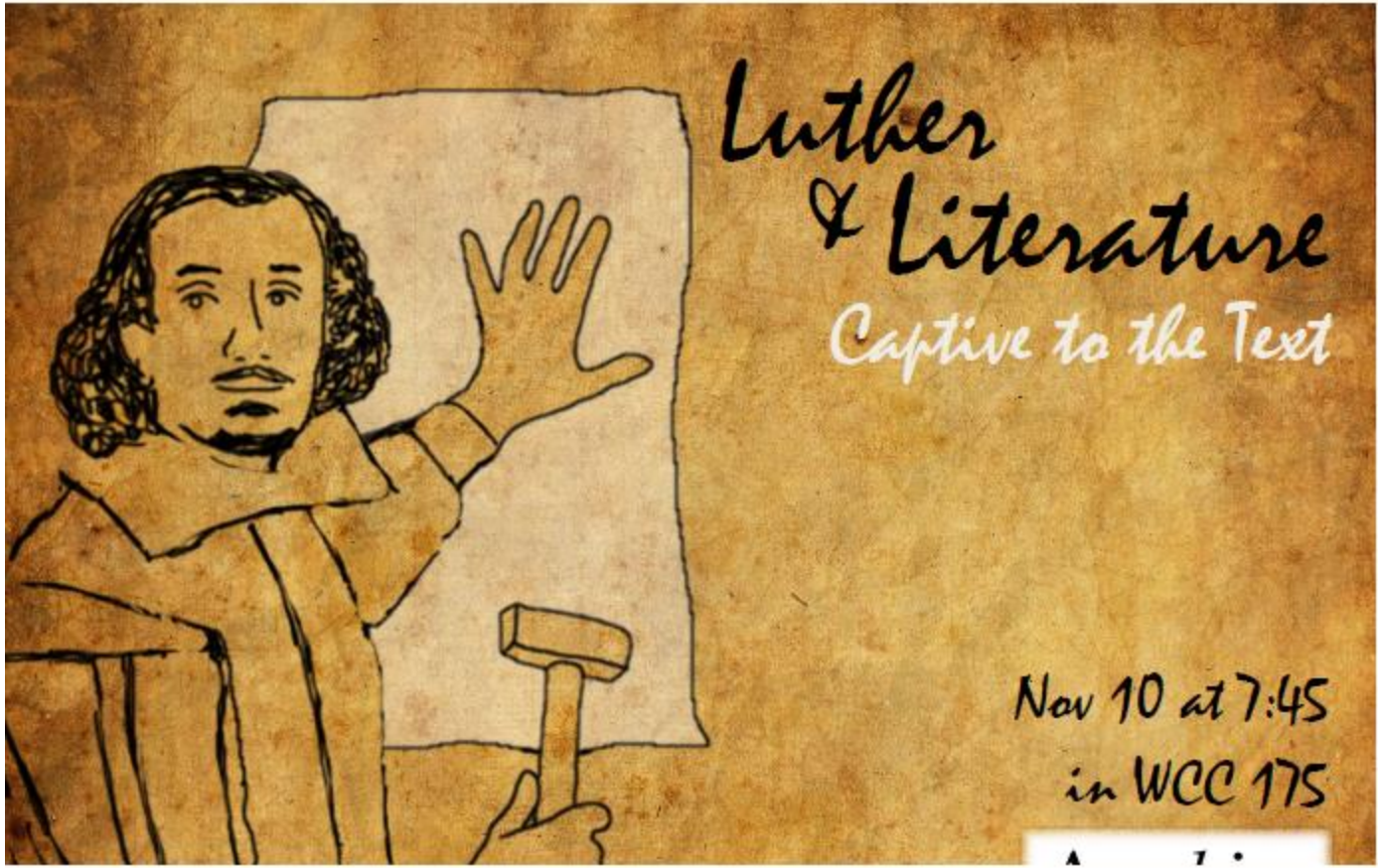

Luther
& Literature
Captive to the Text
Nov 10 at 7:45
in WCC 175

Luther on Genesis 44

Joseph's fiction or silver-cup stratagem is, according to Luther,

"a very beautiful game and a most excellent poem of this poet. . . . From this it is clear that Joseph was a very outstanding man and an illustrious theologian. . . . Accordingly, since a good nature and the Holy Spirit were joined, he had to become a distinguished poet . . . a man of the highest talent and spirit. . . .

Therefore Joseph plays this comedy in a very kindly manner and leads his brothers to despair, destruction, and hell; and when all is lost, the element of comedy appears [a welcomed resolution] and scatters all danger.

Captive to the Text

Luther on Genesis 44 continued

"When matters are in such a bad way and so desperate that no hope of deliverance is seen, we should know that it is the epitasis or the climax of the comedy and that the catastrophe is very near. For such is the nature of God's poems, as Paul neatly says in Ephesians 2:10: 'We are his poinma.'[1] God is the poet, and we are his verses or songs he writes. Accordingly, there is no doubt that all our works and actions are pleasing in God's eyes on account of the special power and grace of faith."[2]

[1] The Greek word for "work" or "handiwork" (NIV 2011) is the same root for "poem."

[2] Luther, "Genesis Lectures," *LW* 7: 365-6.

Luther's Letter to Eoban Hess

I am persuaded that without knowledge of literature pure theology cannot at all endure, just as heretofore, when letters have declined and lain prostrate, theology, too, has wretchedly fallen and lain prostrate; nay I see that there has never been a great revelation of the Word of God unless He has first prepared the way by the rise and prosperity of languages and letters, as though they were John the Baptists. There is, indeed, nothing that I have less wish to see done against our young people than that they should omit to study poetry and rhetoric.

Luther's Letter to Eoban Hess continued

Certainly it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see that by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily. . . . Therefore I beg of you that at my request (if that has any weight) you will urge your young people to be Diligent in the study of poetry and rhetoric.[1]

[1] Smith and Jacobs, 176-177. The *LW* reference is Vol. 49:34, which is based on the Smith translation.

Grasping the Sacred Truth: The Real Presence in Poetry

Melanchthon:

I see that those who do not attain poetry speak somewhat more tediously, and merely crawl on the ground, and have neither weightiness of words nor any strength of figures of speech. . . . Those who make poems judge correctly about the rhythms of fine speech. . . .When people begin to despise poetry . . . it comes about that the ornaments and splendour of words are not held in high regard, people write with less care, everything is read more negligently, and the zeal for inquiring into things flags, a pretext for sloth.[1]

[1] Melanchthon, "Praise of Eloquence", 72-73. With "sloth" here, Melanchthon may have been thinking of what Augustine said about the value of the challenging literary features of the Bible: "The fusion of obscurity with such eloquence in the salutary words of God was necessary in order that our minds could develop not just by making discoveries but also by undergoing exertion" Book 4 of *On Christian Teaching*, 106.

Luther on those who don't know literature and languages:

Even when their teaching is not wrong, [they] are of such a nature that they very often employ uncertain, inconsistent and inappropriate language; they grope like a blind man along a wall, so that they frequently miss the sense of the text and twist it like a nose of wax to suit their fancy.[1]

[1] Luther, "To the Councilmen," 116.

Luther on the overuse of figures of speech:

In it the Scriptures are so forced and pulled in by the hairs that God's worst enemy must have composed it, either that or it is the dream of a poor senseless idiot. Here Melchizidek is remembered, who offered bread and wine; then the lamb comes into it which the people sacrificed of old, and the cake of Elijah, the manna of the fathers, and Isaac, who was to be sacrificed, and I don't know what has not been thought of. All these have had to serve as figures of the sacrament. It is a wonder that he did not include Baalam's ass and David's mule.[1]

[1] Luther, "Misuse of the Mass," LW 36:181-2.

Luther on figurative language in the Lord's Supper:

Synecdoche is a form of speech to be found not only in Holy Scripture, but also in every common language, so we cannot do without it. By synecdoche we speak of the containing vessel when we mean the content, of the content when also including the vessel, as e.g. when we speak of the mug or of the beer, using only one of the two to denote also the other. Or, to take another example, if the king tells his servant to bring his sword, he tacitly includes the sheath. Such an understanding is required by the text. The metaphor [as argued by Oecolampadius and Zwingli] does away with the content, e.g. as when you understand "body" as "figure of the body." That the synecdoche does not do. . . .Figurative speech removes the core and leaves the shell only. Synecdoche is not a comparison, but it rather says: "This is there, and it is contained in it." There is no better example of synecdoche than "This is my body."

Philip, you answer. I am tired of talking.[1]

[1] The Marburg Colloquy, Second Session, in Sasse's *This Is My Body*, 254.

H. Sasse on Luther's Use of Synecdoche:

For Luther the bread is the body in an incomprehensible way. The union between the body cannot be expressed in terms of any philosophical theory or rational explanation. It is an object of faith, based solely on the words of Christ. . . . The objection especially by Zwingli, that thus Luther himself [using the term "synecdoche"] did not understand the sacramental words literally, but figuratively, was refuted by Luther as not being to the point, because the reality of the body was not denied. . . .The synecdoche takes the reality of the elements as well as the reality of the body and blood seriously.[1]

[1] Sasse, *This Is My Body*, *163*.

Luther on understanding the Lord's Supper--
Being captive to God and to his text:

So against all reason and hair-splitting logic I hold that two diverse substances may well be, in reality and in name, one substance. These are my reasons: First, when we are dealing with the works and words of God, reason and all human wisdom must submit to being taken captive. . . . Secondly, if we take ourselves captive to him and confess that we do not comprehend his words and works, we should be satisfied. We should speak of his works simply, using his words as he has pronounced them for us and prescribed that we speak them after him, and not presume to use our own words as if they were better than his. . . .

Luther on Lord's Supper, continued

Here we need to walk in the dark and with our eyes closed, and simply cling to the word and follow. For since we are confronted by God's words, "This is my body"--distinct, clear, common, definite words, which certainly are no trope, either in Scripture or in any language--we must embrace them with faith, and allow our reason to be blinded and taken captive. So, not as hairsplitting sophistry dictates but as God says them for us, we must repeat these words after him and hold to them.[1]

[1] Luther, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper," *LW* 37: 296.

Grasping Sacred Truth--The Uses of Literary Narrative/Story

Luther to Melanchthon, Coburg, Spring 1530:

We have finally arrived at our Sinai, dearest Philipp, but we shall make a Zion out of this Sinai and build three tabernacles on it, one for the Psalter, one for the Prophets, and one for Aesop. But the latter is temporal.[1]

[1] Springer, 1. His Luther quotation is translated from *WA Br*. 5:285.

Luther's version of an Aesop fable:

A lion, fox, and ass were hunting with each other and caught a deer. Then the lion ordered the ass to divide up the prey. The ass made three piles. The lion became angry at this and pulled the ass's skin over his head, so that he stood there with blood streaming from him, and then he ordered the fox to divide up the prey.

Luther's Aesop, continued

The fox pushed the three parts together and gave all of them right to the lion. Then the lion said: "Who taught you how to divide like that?" The fox pointed to the ass and said: "The doctor over there with the red biretta."

This fable teaches two things: The first, lords want to have an advantage, and you should not eat cherries with lords, because they will throw the stems at you.

Luther's Version of Aesop #7 in Springer, p. 133

Springer explains Luther's use of secular story:

In [Luther's] view, even the purist proclamation of the gospel would never render the fallen world a perfect place to live, so it was important for Christians in particular to be on their guard, to be aware of their own native inclinations, and not to be naive about those of others. . . .The fables of Aesop consistently underscore the importance of knowing one's place in the society (as opposed to self-improvement or social betterment), fitting rather neatly with Luther's conviction that living in the end times makes irrelevant all grandiose schemes proposing dramatic social revolution.[1]

[1] Springer, 98-99.

Mann says literature “functions quite effectively as the law does in Luther’s theology: to curb society’s excesses, to reflect our own shortcomings, and demonstrate faith.”

(p. 129)

Handling Sacred Truth-- Both the Art and the Authority of Scripture

The Bible stands as "literature" because it deals with momentous themes of continued existential and eternal relevance. . . . Not only is cognition affected, but also human emotions and volition as well. Indeed, one could argue that excellent artistic technique is absolutely essential for the communication of religious subjects, which by its very nature as the Word of God requires a distinctive, unconventional, captivating, and convincing method of communication in terms of genre and diction, if not style as well: [quoting Eugene Nida] "Any attempt to relate infinite realities to finite experience almost inevitably calls for figurative language, since there are not natural models which combine infinite and finite elements."[1]

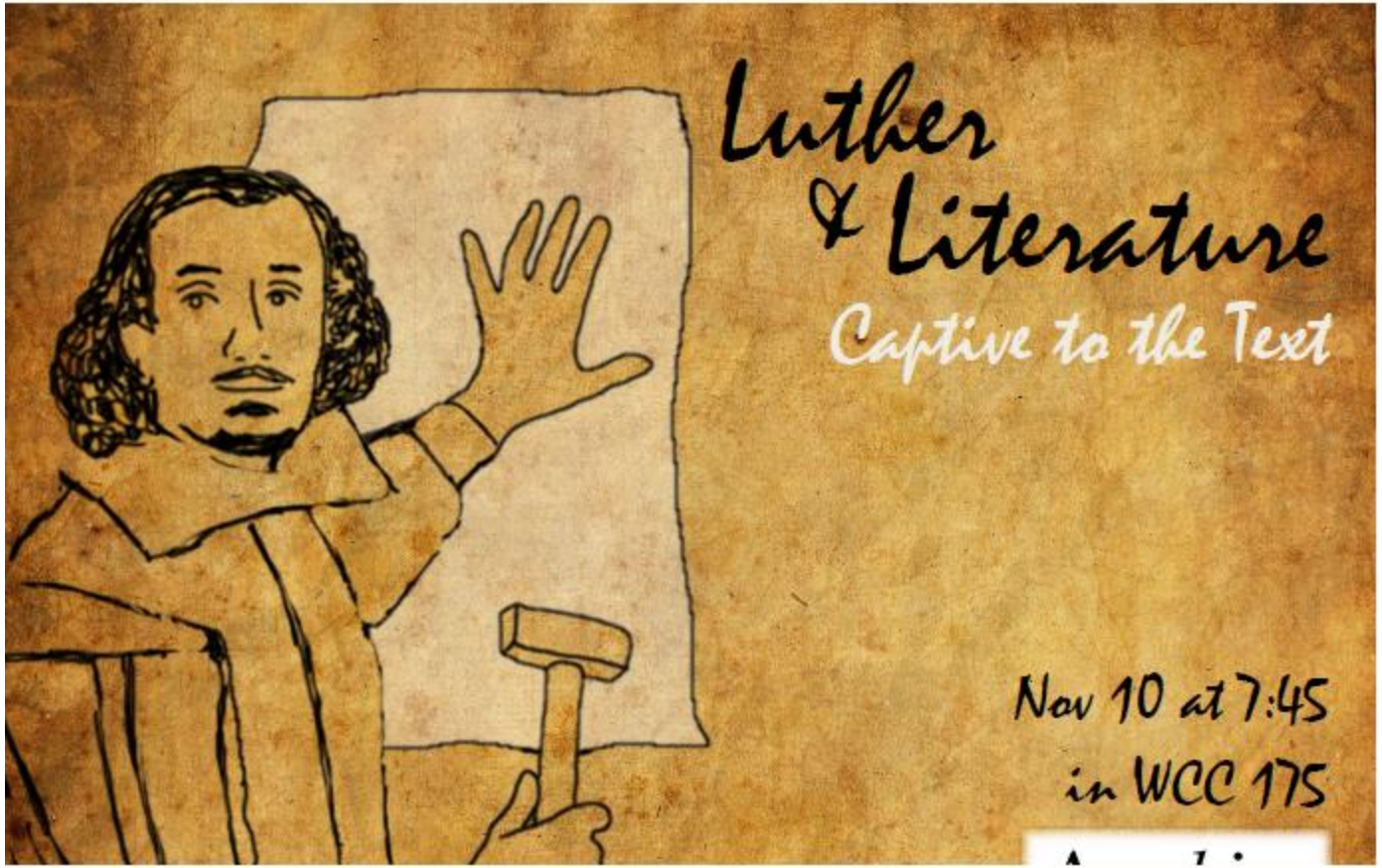
[1] Wendland, 141. The Nida quotation is from Nida *et al. Style and Discourse.* Capetown: Bible Society of South Africa, 1983. 154.

Luther on literature as a gift of God's grace:

God in His essence is altogether unknowable; nor is it possible to define or put into words what He is, though we burst in the effort.

It is for this reason that God lowers Himself to the level of our weak comprehension and presents Himself to us in images, in coverings, as it were, in simplicity adapted to a child, that in some measure it may be possible for Him to be made known to us.[1]

[1] Luther, "Genesis Lectures," *LW* 2: 45.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