

# Rock Strata and the Bible Record

*Edited by*  
**PAUL A. ZIMMERMAN**

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# Contents

Preface / <i>Paul A. Zimmerman</i>	7
SECTION I	
THEOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC GUIDEPOSTS	11
1 / Guiding Theological Principles / <i>Robert D. Preus</i>	12
2 / Assumptions in Science and Paleontology / <i>John W. Klotz</i>	24
3 / Uniformity, Uniformitarianism, and the Foundations of Science / <i>Kenneth L. Currie</i>	40
SECTION II	
TIME IN SCRIPTURE AND GEOLOGY	53
A Statement of the Problem / <i>Paul A. Zimmerman</i>	54
4 / A Critical Evaluation of the Chronology of Ussher / <i>Fred Kramer</i>	57
5 / Scientific Methods of Determining the Age of the Earth / <i>Kenneth L. Currie</i>	68
SECTION III	
THE AFFIRMATIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE CONCERNING CREATION	93
6 / The Biblical Account of the Creation / <i>Fred Kramer</i>	94
SECTION IV	
THE GEOLOGICAL RECORD	115
7 / Overview of the Geological Record / <i>Kenneth L. Currie</i>	116
8 / "Firsts" in the Geological Record / <i>Paul C. Tychsen</i>	124
9 / Human Fossils / <i>Wilbert H. Rusch Sr.</i>	133

**SECTION V**

<b>NOAH'S FLOOD</b>	<b>179</b>
10 / The Biblical Account of the Flood / <i>Fred Kramer</i>	180
11 / Geology and the Flood / <i>Paul C. Tychsen</i>	193
Epilogue / <i>Paul A. Zimmerman</i>	201
Glossary	205

# 1 • Guiding Theological Principles

## *A Lutheran Confessional Approach to the Doctrine of Creation*

ROBERT D. PREUS

It has been generally held that there is a uniquely Lutheran hermeneutics. The Lutheran emphasis on the unity of Scripture, the divine origin and authority of Scripture, and the Christocentricity and soteriological aim of all Scripture—all constitute a series of hermeneutical presuppositions of gigantic proportions, presuppositions which will and should totally determine the interpreter's attitude and approach to the sacred Scriptures. Anthropological and soteriological assumptions are also part of the equipment which the Lutheran theologian brings with him as he interprets Scripture. That the exegete is a poor sinner with a habitual inclination toward evil, that he is in constant need of the Spirit's enlightenment, that all his labors to be fruitful must be preceded by earnest prayer, that every thought even of the regenerate reason must be totally subjected to the words and revelation of God, these too are assumptions of sweeping consequence for the exegete as he goes about his task.

It is important that we as Lutherans understand fully these hermeneutical presuppositions which were not only Luther's but were the possession of the entire Lutheran Church for fully two centuries and were fundamental to the Lutheran Symbols in their approach to Scripture. A doctrinal position may well seem like nonsense until we grasp the exegetical method and the canons of hermeneutics which lead to this position. It is particularly important that we know how the writers of our Lutheran Symbols read the Scriptures, inasmuch as we have subscribed to and are committed to the doctrine of these symbols. Certainly, subscribing to the doctrine of the

Lutheran Confessions involves agreement with the basic approach and hermeneutics which were employed by the writers of the confessions in reading Scripture and drawing the doctrine from it. It is important also to know our Lutheran hermeneutics as we study the doctrine of creation; for there is a definitely Lutheran confessional approach to the doctrine of creation, and specifically as it is set forth in Genesis 1 and 2.

May I therefore offer a series of brief observations on the basic hermeneutical principles and the general exegetical procedure of our Lutheran Confessions.

### **Basic Hermeneutical Presuppositions of the Lutheran Confessions and Procedures for Understanding the Scriptures**

#### **THE HOLY SPIRIT AS THE TRUE INTERPRETER OF SCRIPTURE**

That every Christian needs the grace and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit to understand and believe the Scriptures is an emphasis very strong among Luther and the early reformers. This position is assumed throughout the Lutheran Confessions and is specifically stated in the Formula of Concord which says (SD II, 26): "But to be born anew, to receive inwardly a new heart, mind, and spirit, is solely the work of the Holy Spirit. He opens the intellect and the heart to understand the Scriptures and to heed the Word." In its context this statement shows that the activity of the Spirit in opening up the Scriptures to us is a part of His entire work of converting and enlightening and sanctifying man. It is through the Word that the Spirit comes to us, and it is through the Word—not merely Scriptures, of course, but the Gospel—that He brings us to faith (AC V; Ap XII, 42).<sup>1</sup> This means that only a Christian can read Scripture with complete understanding in the sense of acceptance, although even a Jew or a Turk can often understand the meaning of the words.

#### **THE SCRIPTURES AS THE WORD OF GOD HIMSELF**

The divine origin, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture are assumed throughout the confessional writings and are a fundamental presupposition to all Lutheran exegesis. This

fact is brought out first in those statements which insist that all other writings, even the confessions, are accepted only because they are "drawn from the Word of God" (FC SD Rule and Norm, 10).<sup>2</sup> Again the Word of God is called "eternal truth," and other writings only "a witness to the truth" (FC SD Rule and Norm, 13). Again the Scriptures are called the "pure and clear fountain of Israel," which is the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated (FC SD Rule and Norm, Summary Formulation, 3; Epitome, Rule and Norm, 2).

Second, we find the divine origin and authority of Scripture alluded to by many an appeal and obiter dictum in the confessions. When certain Romanists do not face up to the many testimonies in Scripture concerning justification by faith, the question is asked, "Do they suppose that these words fell from the Holy Spirit unawares?" (Ap IV, 108). Speaking of those passages which warn against human traditions and regulations, the question is again asked, "Is it possible that the Holy Spirit warned against them for nothing?" On one occasion the adversaries are faulted for condemning "several articles in opposition to the clear Scripture of the Holy Spirit" (Ap Preface 9). Such passing statements indicate that the divine origin and authority of Scripture was simply assumed, but very consciously so as the writers of the confessions do their exegesis.

Third, the practice in the Lutheran Confessions of citing Scripture faithfully to prove doctrine, of carrying on detailed exegesis where this is deemed necessary, of condemning all adversaries again and again specifically for being unscriptural brings out the importance of the *sola Scriptura* principle for all faithful and serious exegesis. The doctrine of the divine origin and authority of Scripture means that Scripture is inerrant, a fact which is also assumed, as we see in several passing statements within our confessions. The Scriptures are called "eternal truth" (FC SD Rule and Norm, 13). They cannot err or lie to us (LC IV, 57; V, 76).<sup>3</sup> And "God, who is the eternal Truth," does not contradict Himself in Scripture (FC SD XI, 35), for it is His "pure, infallible, and unalterable Word" (Preface to the Book of Concord, p. 8).

## THE CHRISTOCENTRICITY OF SCRIPTURE AND THE LAW-GOSPEL MOTIF

Like a red thread the promises concerning Christ run through the entire Scriptures, giving them a Christological unity and proclaiming one way of salvation (Ap XXIV, 55, 57; IV, 57; XII, 71; cf. also German text). In like manner all of Scripture is said to be distributed into two parts or to teach two works of God in men: Law and Gospel and the work of terrifying and comforting men (Ap IV, 5; XII, 53; FC SD V, 1, 23). Now all Scripture must be read in the light of Law and Gospel, and to confuse the two teachings is to misread Scripture (Ap IV, 218–221). Furthermore, the article of justification as the epitome of the Gospel is the chief theme of all Scripture which must inform the exegete as he goes about his task (Ap IV, 2; German text); otherwise again all is darkness, even though the grammatical sense of Scripture may well be understood by the exegete. A doctrinal unity is maintained by the Lutheran Confessions along with the Christological unity of Scripture, for all Christian doctrine has its center in the doctrine of the Gospel.

### THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

The clarity of Scripture is maintained by the Lutheran Confessions, and, for the most part, passages of Scripture are cited to support Christian doctrine with little or no comment. This does not imply that there are no obscure passages in Scripture; but again and again the confessions insist that the doctrine taught is based on clear passages of Scripture (Ap IV, 314; LC V, 45; FC SD II, 87; Ap XXIV, 94; FC SD VII, 50; AC XXII, 2; XXIII, 3; XXVIII, 43). Clear passages are those which present no problems in their historical setting or grammatical construction; that which would render any passage or pericope unclear would be either some obscure or unknown historical referent or obscure syntax or vocabulary. Often unclear passages can be explained on the basis of clear passages dealing with the same subject matter.

### THE NECESSITY OF GRAMMATICAL EXEGESIS; FINDING THE LITERAL SENSE OF SCRIPTURE, WHICH IS ONE

The exegesis of historic Lutheranism consistently attempts to discern the literal sense, that is, the intended sense,



of Scripture passages and pericopes (FC SD, VII, 38, 42, 45 to 48, 50). This is consistent with the humanistic heritage of the day. Therefore the constant question is, What does Scripture say? (Ap IV, 231; 264, 267; XII, 84; 138). What is the intention of the author of any given pericope? To discern this intended meaning of the text all the grammatical, lexicographical, and historical tools of the day were employed. Etymologies, Biblical usage, even extra-Biblical data are brought to bear in the attempt to find the meaning of terms and passages (Ap XXIV, 23, 81–83; FC SD V, 7–9; III, 17; Ap IV, 246–53). The search for the simple and native sense of the passages of Scripture rules out allegorizing of the text, hidden meanings, and fanciful interpretations (Ap XII, 106; XXIV, 35; FC SD VII, 113), and this because *sensus literalis Scripturae unus est*. Any undermining of this basic fact destroys all serious exegesis.

#### SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS SCRIPTURE

The principle that Scripture interprets Scripture (*analogia Scripturae*) is derived from the principle of clarity of Scripture and from the fact that the Spirit of God is the principle author of all of Scripture. Therefore any Scripture can shed light on another Scripture passage which deals with the same subject matter; for this is merely interpreting Scripture passages in the light of their widest context. This particular principle is followed by the confessions time and again when they draw from all over Scripture to maintain a certain point (Ap XII, 44–52; IV, 272–285; 256–263; FC SD II, 9–17; 26; VIII, 70). In all such cases various Scripture passages serve to complement each other in offering a complete view of an article of faith. This principle is of especial importance as the exegete interprets unclear passages by clear parallel passages (Ap IV, 87–101; XXVIII, 21; Tr 23<sup>4</sup>; LC I, 65) and as one interprets and understands Old Testament passages in the light of New Testament interpretation (Ap II, 18, 20; XXIII, 64; XXIV, 36).

#### **The Evangelical Lutheran Hermeneutics as Applied to the Main Themes of Genesis 1–3**

There can be little doubt that the Lutheran Confessions (like Luther and the exegetes of the day), regard Genesis 1 and 2

as introducing a history, not presenting a cosmogony. Furthermore, Genesis 2 with its account of Adam and Eve in the Garden cannot be divorced from Genesis 3, which speaks of the fall of these two people into sin. Therefore the entire three chapters are taken together as a unit, although Genesis 3 does not deal specifically with the Creation. One's interpretation of Genesis 3 will notably affect his understanding and interpretation of the preceding chapter. This is very clear in the case of our confessions, which see Genesis 2 in the light of the Fall and the promise of Genesis 3.

## CREATION

Surprisingly little is said about Creation in the Lutheran Confessions. No cosmogony on the basis of Genesis 1 and 2 is offered, although Luther, Chytraeus, and others in commentaries treat the Genesis account as a plain historical descriptive account or history of what actually took place. There is very little said in the Lutheran Symbols about the creation of the world or the universe. It is rather the theological significance of Creation that is emphasized, and this because of various antitheses of the day. For instance, in contrast to the alleged Manicheism of Flacius the goodness of God's creation is stressed (FC, I). And to defend Luther's doctrine of original sin and total depravity against the charges of Eck and others, the Augsburg Confession, Art. XIX, insists that God is not the cause of sin.

As the Lutheran Confessions treat the many texts dealing with Creation, their discussions seem almost invariably to lead to man as the principal creature of God, just as Genesis 1 must lead to Genesis 2 and is incomplete without it. Man is the creature of a good and beneficent Creator God, and all of God's creation serves man. This is the practical theological significance of Creation and the conclusion to be drawn from the creation account.

LC, 1st Art. 11-16: If you were to ask a young child, "My boy, what kind of God have you? What do you know about Him?" he could say, "First, my God is the Father, who made heaven and earth. Apart from Him alone I have no other God, for there is no one else who could create heaven and earth."

For the somewhat more advanced and educated, however, all three articles can be treated more fully and divided into as many parts as there are words. But for young pupils it is enough to indicate the most necessary points, namely, as we have said, that this article deals with creation. We should emphasize the words, "Maker of heaven and earth." What is meant by these words, "I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker," etc.? Answer: I hold and believe that I am a creature of God; that is, that He has given and constantly sustains my body, soul, and life, my members great and small, all the faculties of my mind, my reason and understanding, and so forth; my food and drink, clothing, means of support, wife and child, servants, house and home, etc. Besides, He makes all creation help provide the comforts and necessities of life—sun, moon, and stars in the heavens, day and night, air, fire, water, the earth and all that it brings forth, birds and fish, beasts, grain and all kinds of produce. Moreover, He gives all physical and temporal blessings—good government, peace, security. Thus we learn from this article that none of us has his life of himself, or anything else that has been mentioned here or can be mentioned, nor can he by himself preserve any of them, however small or unimportant. All this is comprehended in the word "Creator."

This statement, which is typical of so many references in our Confessions (AC, XVI, 4–13; FC, Ep I, 2, 4<sup>5</sup>; FC, SD, I, 34–37), stresses not only the original creation of heaven and earth but also the *creatio continua* (continuing creation) and divine providence of God (FC, SD, XI, 4, 6). The doctrine of creation is *used* to serve man: to humble and terrify us, for we sin daily, but it also serves to lift us up and warm our hearts with gratitude toward God for all His blessings (LC, Creed, I, 22–23).

#### ADAM AND EVE

Thus far the exegesis of the Lutheran Confessions pertaining to the doctrine of creation has been application more

than interpretation. And this practice is in conformity with that of Scripture itself (Psalm 104; Isaiah 40; Job 38; Col. 1:16 ff.), which uses the doctrine of creation homiletically, doxologically, and polemically. But just as the Scriptures are not using and applying a mere myth, the confessions too, when they apply the doctrine of creation as they do to the needs of their day, in no way minimize the importance of Genesis 1 and 2 as a factual account of a real creation and a *sedes doctrinae* (seat of doctrine). When we observe what our Lutheran Symbols say about Adam and Eve, we notice that more interpretation is offered than application.

There is not the slightest doubt that the confessions receive as actual history and fact the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 (FC, Ep I, 4; SD, I, 9, 27). Adam and Eve were the first two people of this world—placed by God in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were created with body and soul (FC, Ep I, 4), according to Gen. 2:7; they were created in the image of God (according to Gen. 1:27), which consisted in a wisdom and righteousness being “implanted in man that would grasp God and reflect Him, that is, that man received gifts like the knowledge of God, fear of God, and trust in God” (Ap II, 17–18). Here Gen. 2:7 is definitely interpreted according to Col. 3:10 and Eph. 4:24 (*analogia fidei*—analogy of faith). There is no attempt to interpret Gen. 1:27 independently of the New Testament. These two people, Adam and Eve, were originally created pure, good, and holy, as the Genesis account says (FC, SD, I, 27). Furthermore, marriage was established between Adam and Eve, and this cannot be nullified as a God-pleasing institution (AC, XXIII, 8; cf. Matt. 19:4 ff.).

#### THE FALL AND ORIGINAL SIN

We notice here at once that the historical fact of the Fall is never questioned (FC, SD, I, 23, 9); “the dough out of which God forms and makes man has been corrupted and perverted in Adam” (FC, SD, I, 38). We notice also that Satan is the instigator of sin, the one who “corrupted God’s handiwork in Adam” (FC, SD, I, 42, 7, 27). In this connection even details connected with the Fall narrative are considered to be factual and historical, such as the devil’s manner in tempting Adam

and Adam's subsequent contrition (SA III, VIII, 5<sup>6</sup>; Ap XII, 55). For instance, Luther says (SA III, VIII, 5): "All this is the old devil and the old serpent who made enthusiasts of Adam and Eve. He led them from the external Word of God to spiritualizing and to their own imaginations, and he did this through other external words." Third, we notice the connection, alluded to so often (FC, SD, I, 28, 9, 11, 13; Ap II, 5, 2; AC, II, 1), between Adam's sin (fall) and our sinful condition, that since the fall of Adam all men who are propagated according to nature are born in sin (AC II, 1) and that our sin is a hereditary condition (*Erbsünde*) which we have by conception and birth (Ap II, 6, 11, 8, 23). This connection, which is not drawn from Genesis 3 but from Romans 5; Matt. 15:19; Gen. 8:21; 6:5 and other passages, although never explained, is nevertheless real and is an article of faith. Again we notice how the New Testament is simply brought in to interpret the Old Testament. Barth's doctrine of *Ursünde*, that every man is his own Adam, would be totally untenable. In other words, the actuality of the Fall is the basis of the actuality of original sin today. And this is a matter of confession (SA III, I, 1): "Here we must confess what St. Paul says in Rom. 5:12, namely, that sin had its origin in one man, Adam, through whose disobedience all men were made sinners and became subject to death and the devil."

Other facts pertinent to the description of original sin, its guilt, and its punishment are brought out in our Lutheran Confessions, but not on the basis of Genesis 3. It is interesting that in the confessions (FC, I) Genesis 3 (this historical narrative) is the *sedes doctrinae* for the doctrine of the Fall and original sin, and Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 are hardly mentioned.

### **Conclusions and Comments on the Symbols' Reading and Understanding of the Old Testament on the Themes Treated Above**

The interpretation in our confessions of Genesis 1–3 is an ingenuous one which accepts the prima-facie meaning of the story. No hidden, mystical, or allegorical meanings or genres are sought. And, of course, no interpretation of the account in the light of Moses' readership or *Sitz im Leben* is

attempted. The matter of the 6 days and their length and other problems which may disturb us today are, of course, not even broached. It is rather the theological significance which is emphasized (i. e., 1. a created universe with a transcendent God existing apart from the universe [against pantheism and atheism], 2. a created man and woman as the culmination of God's creation [against polygenesis, which was taught also in those days, e. g., Las Casas, Augustine, Avicenna, and later Isaac Peyrerius], 3. a man created good in the image of God and being immediately at his creation the full realization of what a human is to be [against Manicheism, modern evolutionism, etc.], and 4. a historical fall of Adam and Eve involving an actual act of disobedience against a specific command of God [against minimizing the universality and seriousness of original sin]). We may notice that in all four of these cases other Scriptures can be brought to bear, particularly Romans 5. We note also that the theological significance of Genesis 1-3 is for the Lutheran Symbols dependent wholly on the factuality of the account. This means that there is in Genesis 1-3 a description of something actually happening. A nondescriptive account of Genesis 1-3 (e. g., a demythologized poem sung to God's glory; an aetiological saga; a mere cosmology purified of theogony, theomachy, and other unworthy elements; a reworking of various older Hebrew or other myths) would be totally uncongenial to the Lutheran Confessions as being opposed to the serious theological purpose of the section and to the analogy of faith.

Second, it is surprising how little direct attention is given in the Lutheran Confessions (as they deal with the themes above) to Romans 5. Much more attention is directed to Genesis 1-3, which tells the history. We might say that FC, Art. I, deals with original sin on the basis of Genesis 3, with other passages of Scripture brought in to shed light; the entire article is a sort of commentary (polemical, of course) on Genesis 3, or better, a sort of *Gutachten* (theological opinion) based on Genesis 3. Articles II and III of the FC, which deal with the bondage of the will and with justification, are quite different, having no single *sedes*, but roving all over Scripture in presenting the Lutheran position.

We notice finally how clearly operative various herme-

neutical rules and assumptions are as our confessions address themselves to the theme of Creation, Adam and Eve, the Fall, and original sin. Clearly we see the confessions seeking the *sensus literalis*, the plain and native meaning, of Genesis 1–3. The principle that Scripture is its own interpreter is constantly assumed and applied, as the analogy of faith is brought to bear upon the Genesis pericope. Belief in the unity of Scripture, both doctrinal and Christological, is apparent throughout, for everything in Scripture dealing with Creation and the Fall is related to the discussion without reservation. Both Creation and Fall are treated in such a way as to lead us to Christ and the Gospel. Again we see all being interpreted in the light of Law and Gospel as the confessions seek to understand and apply the doctrines of the Creation and the Fall (cf. Ap IV, 2, German text).\* And we observe that the New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament is taken for granted and accepted without any reservation; the New Testament data are never ignored or lost sight of as Genesis 1–3 is read and applied.

To sum up: the Lutheran Symbols interpret the Biblical themes under discussion both theologically in accord with the evangelical presuppositions for all exegesis and grammatico-historically as the rules of Lutheran hermeneutics would dictate; but in no case do they allow theological assumptions to undermine sound grammatical exegesis. In other words, we would conclude that in their interpretation of Genesis 1–3 our Lutheran Confessions are faithfully following the concerns voiced in the concluding paragraphs of the Formula of Concord, Article XI, 92–93:

“Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). But it is certain that any interpretation of the Scriptures which weakens or even removes this comfort and hope is contrary to the Holy Spirit’s will and intent. We shall abide by this simple, direct, and useful exposition which is permanently and well grounded in God’s revealed will, we shall avoid and flee all abstruse and specious questions and disputations, and we reject and condemn all those things which are contrary to these true, simple, and useful expositions.

\* It cannot be conjectured that Genesis 1 – 3 has nothing to do with Law and Gospel and that therefore on Lutheran principles (cf. Ap IV, 2, German text) we need not insist on a particular interpretation of this pericope, viz., that it presents a historical fact. The premise of such an allegation is false. It is true that Melanchthon sees the Gospel, epitomized in the article of justification, as the *praecipuus locus* of Christian theology “which is of especial service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible” (Ap IV, 2, *Triglot Concordia*); but this article must be seen in the light of God as the “one creator and preserver of all things” (AC I, 3), of man’s fall into sin (AC II) and of the redemption of Christ (AC III). Otherwise one falls into some sort of vague antinomianism which in the end tends to vitiate the Gospel as our theological center. It is not by accident that Melanchthon in the AC and in the Apology presents articles antecedent to the central doctrine of justification: God and the creation of all things, the Fall and original sin, Christ and His work of propitiation. All these must be real if there is any reality in the justification of a sinner before God.

NOTES

1. AC—The Augsburg Confession; Ap—Apology of the Augsburg Confession
2. FC SD—Formula of Concord, Thorough [Solid] Declaration
3. LC—Large Catechism
4. Tr—Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope
5. FC, Ep—Formula of Concord, Epitome
6. SA—The Smalcald Articles