AUGUSTINE’S AND LUTHER’S UNDERSTANDING OF GN 1:26
An Exercise in Systematics

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ABSTRACT
Both Augustine and Luther understood the fundamental importance of the book of Genesis though they did so in very diverse circumstances. As they spent considerable time and energy interpreting this book, both did their best to cater for, and nourish, two separate - and sometimes contradictory – groups of persons. They wrote (a) with the intent of dialoguing with the research world of their time and (b) with those who wanted to deepen their own intellectual skills. But they also had in mind all those unnamed believers who wanted to nurture and grow further in their faith. In diverse ways, both intended their writings on Genesis to help build and form God’s chosen people, the Church. Augustine’s and Luther’s interpretation of the creation narratives climax in their comments on two central verses: Genesis 1:26-27. This article tries to address two major issues: (a) the method both used to retrieve the biblical text into their own context, and (b) the way their understanding of these two verses matured.

KEYWORDS
– Augustine – Creation
– Luther – Biblical interpretation
– Genesis – Image and likeness of God

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Augustine’s encounter with the Book of Genesis started well before his baptism in 387. As the years passed, this book turned out to be one of his major interests through his long and eventful life. As Augustine the bishop reflected on his youth, his young adulthood, and his ensuing, mature encounter with the God whom he had learned to love «so late», he still had to come to grips with a double issue: (a) how could he be sure that he had properly understood the two creation accounts in Genesis? And (b) how could he communicate all that he had been able to understand and place it at the service of his fellow Christians?

May I hear and understand how in the beginning you made heaven and earth (Gen. 1.1). Moses wrote this. He wrote this and went his way, passing out of this world from you to you. He is not now before me, but if he were, I would clasp him and ask him and through you beg him to explain to me the creation. … If he spoke Hebrew, he would in vain make an impact on my sense of hearing, for the sounds would not touch my mind at all. If he spoke Latin, I would know what he meant. Yet how would I know whether or not he was telling me the truth?»¹

The young bishop knew that, if he wanted to share with others his reflections, he had to help them retrieve the two creation narratives before he could expound on the origins of creation, and of his own self. The church leader could have done that systematically as any theologian would. Or, as became a bishop, he could have presented his reflections in some cycle of conferences either leading to Christian initiation or thereafter, as the introduction of neophytes into the sacred mysteries (mystagogy).

On the contrary, Augustine chose to write his Confessions and narrate his own life as a story or some case study (Books 1–9). At the end, he invited his readers to continue pursuing their common quest and join hands in an in-depth retrieval of the creation story (Books 10–15). He knew very well that many, like him, wanted to fathom the one origin of all that there is. And yet, Augustine laboured under a preconception: as a nineteen year old, he had considered the orthodox reading of the book of Genesis so inelegant and barbaric that he simply decided to try his luck elsewhere. At the time, the North African Church was using the Vetus Latina, a crudely translated work which according to Augustine was «unworthy in comparison with the dignity of Cicero». He considered it «something neither open to the proud nor laid bare to mere children; a text lowly to the beginner but, on further reading, of mountainous difficulty and enveloped in mysteries».²
Monica, Augustine’s mother, had taken the initiative to enrol her own teenager into the official catechumenate program; the orator though clung to his status of «catechumen» as it gave him a certain standing in post-Constantinian Milan. If the young adult had found refuge in Manichean esoteric doctrines, he had done so as he considered them to be more plausible retrievals of the Genesis’ creation accounts. After an initial positive interlude, the years he spent with the Manichees proved difficult: after he had become a member of that group, no one seemed to find the time and energy to accompany Augustine and answer his never ending questions. When the 30 year-old professor of rhetoric took up his new post at the imperial court in Milan, he came into close contact with Ambrose, the influential and caring pastor of that city, who patiently guided Augustine into mastering the use of «allegory». The latter thus started reading and appreciating the Scriptures and slowly came to grips with the riddle of evil and its presence in the world, something that Manichaeism had failed to clarify.

On completing his *Confessions*, the bishop of Hippo was ill at ease with the two commentaries he had composed as a fresh convert and a newly ordained priest. So he kept on struggling with his own theological dissatisfaction as he delved deeper into Genesis. The pastor invested precious time and energy into the study of Genesis as he launched himself onto his epoch-making commentary on Genesis: *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (*De Genesi ad litteram*). The issues he still had to deal with were: a the authorship of Genesis and its meaning, b an access restricted to the Latin translations of the Scriptures, and c the interpretation of the divine truths they were meant to convey. When in 1512 Luther obtained his academic appointment to the chair of Biblical Studies, he dedicated his first lectures to the first book of Moses, Genesis. As Wittenberg’s newly founded university thus responded to the humanistic concerns of the time, other universities issued appointments similar to Luther’s. Ten years later, he took up again the same biblical text – the one he loved most – in a cycle of sermons he delivered between 1523 and 1524. He hastily published them during the summer months of 1537 under the title *In Genesin Declamationes*. His very last work – the fruit of his mature years, between June 1, 1535 and November 17, 1545 – is widely known as Luther’s *Great Commentary on Genesis*. Luther worked on and delivered these lectures as far as his failing health permitted him. While the first instalment of these lectures was published during Luther’s lifetime, the rest saw the light after some heavy handed editing carried out by his close collaborators. These lectures, though, drained his waning strength and, as he brought his last
lecture to a close, Luther could not but conclude: «God grant that after me others will do better. I can do no more. I am weak. Pray God for me that He may grant me a good and blessed last hour.»

Both Augustine and Luther addressed and wrote for a Christian audience. Both did their best to cater for, and nourish, two separate – and sometimes contradictory – groups of persons. They wrote with the intent of dialoguing with the research world of their time and with those who wanted to deepen their own intellectual skills. But they also had in mind all those unnamed believers who wanted to nurture and grow further in their faith. In diverse ways, both intended their writings on Genesis to help build and form God’s chosen people, the Church.

Augustine’s and Luther’s interpretation of the creation narratives climax in their comments on two verses: Genesis 1:26–27. This article tries to address only two major issues:

a. the method both used to retrieve the biblical text into their own context, and
b. the way their understanding of these two verses matured.

I. AUGUSTINE

1.1 A literal understanding of Genesis

Augustine began his first, unfinished commentary on Genesis with words that clearly conveyed some of the innermost feelings the newly ordained priest entertained, which continued to haunt the bishop’s pastoral care:

The obscure mysteries of the natural order, which we perceive to have been made by God the almighty craftsman, should rather be discussed by asking questions than by making affirmations. This is supremely the case with the books which have been entrusted to us by divine authority, because the rash assertion of one’s uncertain and dubious opinions in dealing with them can scarcely avoid the charge of sacrilege.»

If God is the author of all that exists, the soul must be the core and fundamental trait of every human being. Following Augustine’s Neoplatonic comprehension of existence, one would understand the soul as the apex and vital force of the created order. But, Augustine insisted, it is also that spiritual «substance» which permits creation to approach and contemplate God. As the human soul seeks God, it enters into a relationship of truth and love with its Creator. Were it to understand God incorrectly, it would fail to grasp its own nature and could find itself on some wild
goose chase. Such had been the experience of Augustine’s Manichean years. Its outcome would only be «sacrilege», that is, the transgression of the honour and love that should be God’s.

With hindsight, Augustine believed that his two-book refutation of Manichaeanism – his first reading of Genesis – turned out to be too much of an allegorical interpretation. Consequently, he embarked on a second commentary which he envisaged as a literal reading of Genesis. By the time he was commenting on Gn 1:26–27, he succumbed under the burden and left his second attempt incomplete. The private study of Genesis he had done after he was ordained to the priesthood did not prove adequate or satisfactory. As he took up the challenge for the third time he decided neither to complete nor even less to revise his unfinished commentary: he had to make a clean start. His goal though remained unchanged: he had to provide «not the allegorical meanings of the text, but the proper assessment of what actually happened».7

As he interpreted the creation of darkness in Gn 1:4 and expounded on the sin of rational creatures (angels), he understood the creation of light as the angels’ restoration. At that point, Augustine quickly chided himself as follows:

But this is an interpretation on the lines of prophetic allegory, which is not what we have undertaken in this work. We undertook, you see, to talk here about the scriptures according to their proper meaning of what actually happened, not according to their riddling enigmatic reference to future events.8

One of Ambrose’s tasks as he assisted Augustine’s preparation for baptism was that of helping the latter digest those biblical passages the young orator had either detested or frowned upon. Ambrose introduced him to the method of finding the meaning of the Old within the New Testament: prophecy – or hindsight – could clarify many obtuse and unfathomable texts. Relying on prophecy, allegory assumed that the meaning of a text was to be found only in subsequent, or future, events. While some specific text might appear at first sight enigmatic, in the light of Christ’s mystery the interpreter can find the necessary tools to comprehend that same text. In Christ, every biblical riddle encounters its perfect and complete resolution. In the high Middle Ages, theology consequently equated the allegorical reading of Scriptures with the Christological interpretation of those same texts.

Augustine though wanted to understand inner-worldly existence: he was not intent at articulating Christology. Augustine the bishop still had to achieve his lifelong dream: a literal understanding of Genesis. By this
he understood something radically different from what third millennium exegesis comprehends. Working toward a literal comprehension of a text, a scholar would today opt for formal, structural, and linguistic analysis that, at best, would hardly go any further than the specific context of the one biblical book. When the researcher today studies the first two chapters of Genesis, this cannot even be true as the two creation narratives belong to different epochs, arise within different theological traditions, and resort to diverse concepts and expressions.

Even with his limited knowledge of the text, Augustine could and did understand that in the first pages of the Bible two creation narratives are placed side by side. He firmly believed, though, that both accounts had to be factual narrations. Such a belief quickly cornered Augustine into a conundrum. Could God create the same things twice over? And how did he do it? He also firmly believed that Moses was the one, human author of the whole Pentateuch and the one who gave us both creation accounts.

Augustine’s objective was that of (a) asserting the truth of all that came to be and (b) defending the Genesis narratives as faithful accounts of all that happened at the beginning of time. To do so, he had to discard any figurative meaning. If Genesis 1 were to be seen as some mere symbol while Gen 2 explained the way things really came about, he would be playing into the hands of the Manichees and their question: what was God doing before he began to create. He correctly understood that the content of a text went well beyond the mere literal account, and could (i) suggest «eternal realities», (ii) recount deeds, (iii) foretell future events, as well as (iv) indicate some moral course of action.

Consequently, Augustine developed the following rules of thumb. At first, biblical scholars had to deepen their understanding of a particular biblical writer and the latter’s particular cultural milieu. Linguistic critique and heuristic appraisal would then constitute a second step, even though researchers could only handle them to the best of their concrete abilities. Ultimately though, the rule of faith had to be the decisive criterion that guided and motivated the Christian interpreter, as the latter weighed each single word (or construct) and penetrated its «hidden» meaning.

Faith raises questions, stimulates the interpreter’s curiosity and points to the sure path that leads to God. Exegesis, according to Augustine, is the result of one’s listening to God and his word: «The truth of God invites to faith through human language»\textsuperscript{10} — \textit{fides ex auditu}\textsuperscript{11}

When Augustine strove to interpret literally some biblical text, he wanted to move beyond that same text and contemplate the Truth in person: God. It was much more than some biblical hermeneutics. His exeges-
is read the Genesis text in the light of the Christian profession of faith. The God who spoke through the Bible is the same Father who created the universe and all the «obscure mysteries of the natural order». The object of Augustine’s literal efforts went well beyond the narrative itself toward the God who does the speaking. No wonder, Augustine’s own evaluation of his exegetical work on Genesis reads as follows:

It is a work in which more questions were asked than answers found; and of those that were found only a few were assured, while the rest were so stated as still to require further investigation.

1.2 Who is the God of Gen 1:26?

As a catechumen, Augustine had fled from the Christian community in North Africa and found refuge among the Manichees because he could not longer be part of a group that forbade open questioning and repressed unrestrained discussions. At the time, a kind of anti-intellectualism pervaded his Church. Throughout the rest of his life, this became something he fought against through his own ministry and committed writing. If the teenager had rejected blind faith and sought understanding among heretics, the pastor still held on to the same objectives though within orthodoxy and orthopraxis. After he found out that the Manichees repeated slogans and were intimidated by his questioning mind, he abhorred catchwords and stopped at nothing on his way to God. Following in Ambrose’s footsteps, Augustine espoused «analogy», as one cannot directly posit anything material or conceptual of God himself. «There are no words ... that can possibly describe how God made and established heaven and earth and every creature which he set in place there,» Augustine declared.

In perfect antithesis to Manichean theology, the newly baptised Augustine – still a lay person – proclaimed the Father creating in Christ as the God of Genesis 1. The Creator is the same God who is also Saviour and Redeemer: he is the Truth in person. Quoting directly John’s Prologue (1:1–3) and Jn 8:25, Augustine went a step further and identified Christ as the beginning of all that exists. Though he interpreted Gn 1:1 allegorically – i.e. in the light of New Testament revelation – it was his faith that led the way. In his The Trinity, Augustine returned to the same train of thought and expressed it with greater clarity:

In the form of God, he [the Word] made man; in the form of a slave, he was made man. For if the Father alone had made man without the Son, it would have not been written: «Let us make man to our image and likeness.»
This constituted a major shift in Augustine’s theology: he was now speaking of the Word – the second Person of the Trinity – as Creator without implying necessarily his future Incarnation. In the *Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis*, Augustine reassessed the role of the Father and the Son at creation and added one new, important constituent. It was the Holy Spirit who suggested to both Father and Son the words «Let ... be made (fiat)» (Gn 1, *passim*) and «Let us make ... (faciamus)» (Gn 1:26).

Creation, therefore, is the work of the three divine Persons. If the Word is the beginning (Gn 1:1), the one through whom creation came to be, the Father is the origin of all as he creates in the Son through the Holy Spirit. It was in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* that, for the first time, Augustine clearly read «Let us make man in our image» of Gn 1:26 as a clear indication of a «plurality of persons ... on account of Father and Son and Holy Spirit.» «Image», he contended, is in the singular and cannot simply be a parallelism of that plurality of divine Persons. It was the unique oneness of the creature as one image that demands a unity within the action of the Trinity. He saw that Gn 1:26 clearly indicated the Trinity acting as one: the three divine Persons act *ad extra* in concert, as one subject. If the three Persons did create all together, the human person could never be made in the image of just one of them: humanity must therefore be (i) the one image (ii) of the one God (iii) in three Persons.

Augustine rephrased the above as follows: «‘Let us make’ and ‘our’ are said in the plural ... that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit might make to the image of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in order that man might subsist as the image of God. But God is the Trinity.» He then forced himself to examine in depth the triadic constitution of the human soul and discover eventual traces of the Trinity in the body, created as an image of God that could only be similar to (likeness) but never equal God!

And yet, did it really happen in this fashion? Was *The Trinity* just a subsequent development to *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* or a more systematic presentation of creation? Augustine himself declared that he had begun his commentary on Genesis when he had already been working on his *The Trinity*, but he did finish his commentary before the latter.

**1.5 Humanity and the «Rationes Causales»**

The version of Gn 1:26–27 that Augustine had at his disposal differed somewhat from the original Hebrew text.
The Latin version that Augustine made use of carries two variants, without which scholars today would find it hard to understand his theological interpretation of Gn 1:26–27. It correctly translated the original Hebrew «and he will have dominion» (*). Current translations prefer to place the verb in the plural, so that it may run parallel to the «male and female» of Gn 1:27 (*). The same Latin translator must have assumed that he had to avoid a pleonastic use of «in his own image» that recurred twice in the Hebrew original; that meant that God’s creation of man continued with the words «in the image of God» (*), while the second part of Gn 1:27 read: «he created him male and female». In so doing, the translator destroyed the original Hebrew play on words that very carefully drew a perfect double between the first and middle parts of verse 27. The Latin version had the concrete «male and female» – in the third part of the same verse – explain the rather abstract concept of the «image». Augustine could never have guessed that a Hebrew word had gone missing! Consequently, he assumed that God gave dominion to the one image (Gn 1:27a), before it was ever articulated as «male and female» (*).

Augustine distinguished between the two creation narratives and divided his first attempt at interpretation – On Genesis: a Refutation of the Manichees – into two distinct books. When considering the image, he

<table>
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<th>Augustine’s Version</th>
<th>The RSV¹⁹</th>
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<td>Then God said, Let us make man in our image and our likeness; and let him have dominion (*) over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.</td>
<td>Then God said, «Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.»</td>
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<td>27 So God created man to the image of God; (♭) he made him male and female (♣); God created them</td>
<td>So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.</td>
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<td>28 and blessed them ... .</td>
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mainly refuted Manichean criticism that the orthodox faith forced anthropomorphism onto the transcendent God. He then summarily drew the outline of his future theological thought when he added: «When man is said to have been made to the image of God, it is said with reference to the interior man, where reason is to be found and intelligence». Though he was clearly banking on his underlying philosophical understanding, Augustine already then comprehended the narrative of Genesis 1 as the account of a «spiritual» creation: whatever our senses perceive came to be in the second creation account. God, Augustine insisted, handed humanity dominion over the rest of creation on account of the latter’s spiritual prowess and potency: «All the other animals, after all, are not subject to us on account of the body, but on account of the intelligence, which we have and they do not». 20

Augustine the layman scrupulously and meticulously added that the dominion we know and experience is that reserved to fallen humanity: the dominion God originally intended, belonged to «that perfection which he [man] had when made to God’s image.» Hence, it follows that the original blessing God reserved for the «first» humanity (Gn 1:28ff) should be taken «in a spiritual sense as well.»21 He understood life before the fall as fashioned according to the lofty Neoplatonist ideals of happiness and tranquillity, harmony and beauty.

The newly-ordained priest stopped writing his Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis as he started to tackle the biblical concepts of image and likeness. The «pre-eminence of reason» is again the key. Faced with two apparent synonyms and having to justify the facticity of both, Augustine thought that image (imago) could be something real and concrete, even when it was made of a substance different from that of its original. He then treated the concept likeness (similitudo) as an abstract. Hence, he interpreted the image as expressing humanity’s basic relationality with the Creator. Likeness, on the contrary, accounted for each individual human relationship with the rest of God’s creation: those creatures over which God calls humanity to exercise its dominion. When God created and imposed the form he wanted on every single creature, a certain likeness came to be in every single thing God made. Through participation, it is the soul or mind – the «innermost and principal element in humanity» – that is by far greater than any other likeness to be found in other creatures. It also «holds the leading place in human nature» itself (that is, it controls the body).22

Augustine then turned to the theological datum that in God «person» means distinction. When he applied that to humanity, likeness cannot sim-
ply account for distinction as the image does that. Likeness thus should account for the diversity there exists between the many single individuals, even though all humans are created in God's likeness. A second important distinction stems from the fact that humanity is «created» but not «begotten» in God's image. There is therefore an unbridgeable disparity between the begetting of the eternal Image – the Son – and the creation of the human person in God's image. It is likeness, though, that accounts for either closeness or distance in the relation between God and man:

For one does not approach God across intervals of space but by likeness, and by unlikeness he draws away from him. For there are some who distinguish in such a way that they will have the Son to be the image, but man to be not an image, but to the image.23

In The Literal Meaning of Genesis, Augustine's interpretation of Gn 1:26–27 attained its most brilliant and profound formulation. As Augustine the bishop deepened his understanding of the creation accounts, his main intent was that of clarifying their content according to the rule of faith. Though no longer directly concerned with the refutation of Manicheism as he had earlier been, he knew well that the origin of all there is constitutes an issue of the utmost importance for the well-being of the whole Church. Working at an in-depth interpretation of humanity's creation in God's image the bishop was carrying out his pastoral duties as he helped his fellow believers expand and develop the understanding of their union with God.

But one major hurdle still begged for clarification: how could there be, side by side, two complete accounts of the one creation God made? If, as Augustine believed, the first two chapters of Genesis narrated two different moments – or dimensions – of the one creation, then (a) both accounts had to be equally and literally true, and (b) an allegorical interpretation of the two moments could never sufficiently account for the objectivity of the two narratives. Could time and succession be enough to distinguish between the two? A simple «yes» could never satisfy Augustine's thirst for truth.

In Book IV of his The Literal Meaning of Genesis, Augustine proposed a new theory: the rationes primordiales or rationes causales. That God created together with time was Augustine's essential answer to the major Manichean objection: what was God doing before he created? Was he idle? He had dealt extensively with that issue in the last three books of his Confessions. He knew that, were one to consider creation from God's point of view, then
it should be timeless and simultaneous (everything comes to be at once as, within God’s eternity, there can never be any flow of time). According to Augustine, in the first (Gn 1), simultaneous creation God simply established everything as causes so that, in the second (Gn 2), those same primordial causes could be «realised visibly.»24 Things, he asserted, needed to be «unwrapped from their wrappings’ in the course of subsequent ages,» even though they were «completely finished then in a certain way» right from the very beginning, when God simultaneously created the world.25

But why did God have to fashion humanity at two distinct times? Augustine knew that revelation could never allow him «dualism» as an easy way out. If dualism could not be the answer, what could? And he could never find a satisfactory solution. If a dualist interpretation were possible, then Gn 1:26 would account for the creation of the human soul (the interior man), while Gn 2:7ff demonstrated how sexually differentiated bodies came into being. But on creating humanity in his image, God made it one … and complete. This is all the more so that the Latin text Augustine had at his disposal read Gn 1:27b as follows: God «made him male and female». The «he» of Gn 1 is supposedly meant to be a ratio causalis that later became the «male and female» of Gn 2, after they had been fashioned out of the earth. Augustine thought it could also explain why, in the second account, God induced man to sleep and created the woman out of his side (Gn 2:21–22), so that the woman was already somehow present and included within the one ratio causalis of Gn 1:27.

II. LUTHER

2.1 Only Scripture explains itself

When Luther preached his In Genesin Declamationes between 1523 and 1524, he recalled the intent that had originally guided him the first time he dealt with Genesis, some ten years before. He was not seeking to propose a new doctrine or some marvel of human scholarship; he simply wanted to exhort and admonish Christians, learned or otherwise. Genesis itself, as the first and the best-known book in the whole Church, demanded such a course of action.

On the contrary, as Luther began his Lectures on Genesis, he dedicated an introduction meant to clarify the method he wanted to follow: «The first chapter [Gn 1] is written in the simplest language; yet it contains matters of the utmost importance and very difficult to understand.»26 Many commentators and biblical scholars, Luther knew so well, had raised diverse questions and suggested innumerable points and, at the end, believ-
ers found themselves lost in utter confusion. They could hold on only to two clear points: (a) that the world has a beginning, and (b) that God created out of nothing. Accordingly Luther decided on a literal interpretation of the Bible but went about it more resolutely than Augustine himself:

*We assert that Moses spoke in the literal sense, not allegorically or figuratively, i.e., that the world, with all its creatures, was created within six days, as the words read.*

While Augustine did comprehend the six days as a form of some primordial order, Luther stuck to the literal chronology of the world, a timeframe that scientists today would associate with a «Young-Earth» theory. He explicitly criticized Augustine’s interpretation of the Hexameron as an instantaneous creation that took place in some kind of mystical time; he should have been criticising Augustine’s theory of the *rationes causales*. Luther exhorted his audience to place their trust solely in Moses’ authority rather than in anything else:

*We know from Moses that the world was not in existence before 6,000 years ago. Of this it is altogether impossible to convince a philosopher, because, according to Aristotle, no first man or last man can be conceded. ... For what need is there of setting up a twofold knowledge? Nor does it serve any useful purpose to make Moses at the outset so mystical and allegorical. His purpose is to teach us, not about allegorical creatures and an allegorical world but about real creatures and a visible world apprehended by the senses. Therefore, as the proverb has it, he calls «a spade a spade,» i.e., he employs the terms «day» and «evening» without allegory, just as we customarily do.»

In just one paragraph Luther rapidly articulated a number of principles. First he preferred a literal interpretation to allegorical reading. According to Luther, the four approaches proposed by medieval theology in biblical hermeneutics could be condensed into two: the literal and the allegorical. The latter included the moral (or tropological) and the eschatological (or anagogical). A lot has been said as to whether Luther consistently espoused the use of Scripture regardless of tradition, or whether – in biblical hermeneutics – the mature Luther recommended some limited recourse to tradition. The fact that he felt the need to refute Aristotle (and Aquinas), and gave limited assent to the writings of Hilary of Poitiers, Augustine, and the medieval commentaries of Nicholas of Lyra, all that would advocate the mature Luther’s interest in the centuries-old tradition of the Church.
Whatever Luther’s position could have been, he did certainly bank on the following axiom: «Only Scripture can explain itself, insofar as it is the written Word of God.» But as Luther invited his readers to discard Augustine’s allegorical interpretation he did add: «If we do not comprehend the reason for this, let us remain pupils and leave the job of teacher to the Holy Spirit.»

In his exegesis, Luther often placed side by side a number of texts so that one text would illuminate and explain the other. Some Fathers of the Church had recommended the method of having a more widely used text – or one that was better known – to illustrate another, more difficult passage: «The holy Fathers explained Scripture by taking the clear, lucid passages and with them shed light on obscure and doubtful passages.» What Luther thus hinted at, was the chance to understand a text in a wider scriptural context.

James A. Nestingen succinctly drew up the strengths and weaknesses of the Reformer’s task:

“For preachers, Luther’s approach to Genesis is at its greatest strength just where current biblical criticism is at its weakest – in ferreting out the way the text addresses the hearer. Here Luther’s use of the text shows the way biblical narrative has functioned in the past and should once again, as the church seeks to recover its story.”

2.2 The God of Jesus Christ

In Genesis Declamationes, when Luther started to comment on humanity’s creation in God’s image, he took stock of the many interpretations that simply adopted Augustine’s reading of the plural «Let us make...» (Gn 1:26), and took it as referring to the Trinity. Such scholastic authors launched themselves into long excursus through which they tried to explain the triadic constitution of the human being. Luther decided he did not want anything of the sort but simply to follow Paul’s clear understanding (a) that the post-lapsarian humanity is an «earthly» creation (1Cor 15:48f), (b) that the first humanity had been created by God in justice and in holiness (Eph 4:22–24), and (c) that the renewed humanity will one day be once again the image God had intended it to be at the very beginning (Col 3:3–4).

Adam, Luther believed, was the first person to be created both in the image of God and in the image of Christ; his life was illuminated by human wisdom (sapientia humana) and by an exquisite union with God (exquisita religio). Luther’s insistence on humanity as created in the image of the Christ allowed him to establish connections with the sacrifice of the cross and with redemption right from the very moment of creation. Had
he said that humanity was made in the image of the Word, such a closely
knit connection between the earthly paradise and the sacrifice of the
cross would have been harder to sustain. The German version of the text
harps on the double choice present in history right from the very begin-
nung: Christ, the perfect image of God, and Adam who was shortly to be-
come a terrible and horrifying creature.

In his Lectures on Genesis, Luther read the plural of «Let us make» (Gn
1:26) as follows: «God summons Himself to a council and announces some
sort of deliberation.»33 This set Luther free from any trinitarian interpre-
tation of humanity’s origins even as he dwelt on God’s special plan and prov-
idence, something that greatly distinguishes humanity from the rest of cre-
ation. Since God’s deliberation singled out humanity as his image, God’s
words convey those special characteristics that distinguish it from the rest
of creation. God’s plan went far beyond the initial moment of creation: it
envisioned a better future for the humanity God was creating.

Luther was also clear about his eschatological hermeneutics when he
wrote that, to those who are «spiritually minded,» Moses explained how
«we were created for a better life in the future than this physical life
would have been, even if our nature had remained unimpaired.»34 To fur-
ther sustain his claim that his own eschatological vision depended as
much on the fall as it stemmed from God’s plan and providence, Luther
mentioned Peter Lombard. Bodily activities such as eating and procre-
ating are limited in time and energy and, when time would have come to an
end, God would have transferred the saints that composed human kind to
an eternal and spiritual form of existence. The reference to Paul’s theolo-
gy of the saints, and to their future glory, is quite evident.

Luther’s soteriological hermeneutic identified the creator God as the
Father of Jesus Christ and underscored the fact that, without Christ’s
mission on earth, human existence could never have attained what God’s
plan and providence had set in score. While Luther readily ascribed to
the original humanity the chance of achieving full union with God, he
also clearly mentioned the future merits that could only be obtained in
Christ. He thus underlined the fact that heaven, and full communion with
God, is always God’s own gift.

Luther’s intent was therefore that of presenting his readers with a pre-
lapsarian creation that could be understood in terms of a post-lapsarian
vision of human existence. His interpretation reaches its climax at the
mention of Christ’s merit. Could Luther have merely been applying his
biblical hermeneutics by means of which one could understand some-
ting more difficult through something easier to grasp? Was he mention-
ing Christ’s merits because sinful humanity cannot do anything except through Christ? Or could Luther have been implying some sort of *previsa merita*, through which even pre-lapsarian humanity would have come to God solely through Christ?

The least one can say is the following: Luther’s adoption of the messianic title «Christ» at the moment of creation demands a God who already created humanity in the light of the future incarnation of his Son and his consequent mission on earth.

*Without a doubt, just as at that time God rejoiced in the counsel and work by which man was created, so today, too, He takes pleasure in restoring this work of His through His Son and our Deliverer, Christ. It is useful to ponder these facts, namely, that God is most kindly inclined toward us and takes delight in His thought and plan of restoring all who have believed in Christ to spiritual life through the resurrection of the dead.**

Notwithstanding the above, it was to the Holy Spirit that Luther ascribed the gift of human dignity: its glory sets humanity apart from the rest of creation.

If Luther saw in the Creator the God of Jesus Christ, he did so to explain (a) the goal for which humanity was being created, (b) the fullness of revelation in which humanity would one day understand all the words of God, (c) the redemption of the fallen humanity that would restore humanity to a greater dignity, and (d) the ultimate fulfilment that constituted humanity’s ultimate happiness. But, are we back to the four senses of Scripture: the literal, the allegorical or Christological, the moral or tropological, the eschatological or anagogical? Or is it the rereading of Genesis in the light of the rule of faith?

### 2.5 Image and Likeness

In 1527, Luther’s reading of Genesis centred on his understanding that human dignity stemmed from and depended upon God’s image in man and woman and, as such, can only be an object of faith. Non-believers, he added, cannot acknowledge human dignity as such, once it is a theological reality beyond their comprehension. In the German version, Luther explained how God made man an image, created according to the measure of humanity itself. When one tries to comprehend humanity in God’s image, the point of reference cannot be God as much as humanity itself. Though this might take the contemporary scholar by surprise, Luther did justify his interpretation as follows. A double option confronts the human person, body and soul: one must decide to become an image
either of God or of the devil. Consequently the likeness – the end result of that same option – depends on the choice of each individual. Luther put this either / or in very clear terms: either wisdom, virtue and love, friendship and service, or bad lust.

The day Adam sinned, the «fruit» (effect) of being made in God’s image did not disappear: what went missing was the very image of God. Adam chose to be an image of Satan. By «fruit» one should understand that, whatever happens, humanity is always God’s creation, encountering its foundation and its roots in the Creator. Luther used a very challenging turn of phrase: «It is not within human power to be either a man or a woman, but each can determine whether one wanted to be created by God, as it should be.» For Luther, the image cannot therefore be constitutive of the human person. Though the act of being an image is, each one needs to decide what kind of image one wants to be.

In his Lectures on Genesis, Luther explained how God created Adam and accorded him the gift of a double life: one «physical» and the other «immortal». Notwithstanding the physical dimension, the first humanity was also made in the image and likeness of God. It could reach out toward a kind of life Adam received from God «only in hope.» Did Abraham serve as model for Luther’s understanding of pre-lapsarian Adam? The Patriarch who lived all his life hoping in God’s promise was praised and extolled by Paul as a model for all believers (Rom 4:18). Even before the fall, Adam’s life would have consisted in sustaining the hope of a future life and in directing himself and his progeny toward the goal God had barely, though clearly, revealed. But revelation implies the knowledge of some reality that is not immediately accessible. Adam should have welcomed God’s manifestation of a future glory and should have acted accordingly; but this was not the case.

Though Luther understood the image as «gift,» something the first humanity received from God with the gift of life, he interpreted the image as basically relational. The human image could potentially do one of two things: either grow in God’s grace, or be lost on account of sin.

My understanding of the image of God is this: that Adam had it in his being and that he not only knew God and believed that He was good, but that he also lived in a life that was wholly godly; that is, he was without the fear of death or of any other danger, and was content with God’s favour.

When Luther clarified what the human image could consist of he referred his readers to Augustine’s The Trinity (IX–XI), even though he still stayed at a «safe» distance from Augustine’s stance. He could not see eye to eye
with Augustine on account of what amounted to a problem in biblical hermeneutics: could Aristotle, a mere philosopher, explain some biblical concept? Luther believed that Augustine had completely adopted Aristotle’s three powers of the soul: memory, intellect, and will. Consequently, in Luther’s opinion, Augustine was reverting to non-biblical categories to explain «the image of God which is in all.»

The major difficulty though is due to the fact that, for Luther, image and likeness were two synonyms which stood for the one creation of God. Likeness was the easier concept that clarified and explained what the image stood for. On the contrary, the Western patristic tradition, starting with Irenaeus, considered likeness to be the weaker concept among the two. The Fathers believed that likeness could be lost through sin, without impairing God’s image in the human person; they held that image stood for what God created humanity to be while likeness was what God had intended humanity to become.

When we speak about that image, we are speaking about something unknown. Not only have we had no experience of it, but we continually experience the opposite; and so we hear nothing except bare words. For Luther, the «image» was something that could grow and could be lost through sin. When explaining «likeness,» he correctly understood it as a noun in apposition with «image.» While likeness, he added, should consist in the various gifts of grace that render the image all the more perfect, it is the image that makes humanity what God wanted it to be. He also cited the medieval theological axiom that «our nature is perfected through grace.»

If the Creator did provide memory with hope, the intellect with faith, and the will with love, Luther insisted, humanity should be aware that the only self-image it possessed has been tainted with sin and depravity. Hence, by converting image and likeness into two interchangeable concepts, Luther could refer to the one human reality that could be affected by sin as much as by grace. Luther’s main contention was that the image in humanity cannot be underestimated and considered as if it were some natural trait: it is God’s own gift, something that humanity can never understand or fathom.

Augustine’s solution though is still ultimately Luther’s: so atrocious and dreadful was humanity’s downfall through sin that only the use of the superlative can somehow account for humanity’s pre-lapsarian state. Man’s inner and outer sensations were then «of the purest kind; » «his intellect was the clearest, his memory was the best, and his will was the most straightforward.» Luther thus explained Gn 1:26 by commenting on the fall and its after-effects. By Luther’s standards, his hermeneutics could make use of a more accessible text (Gn 3) to illustrate another less intelligible passage (Gn 1).
AND BEYOND ...

Both Augustine and Luther wanted to deepen their understanding of God’s word in the light of their own life experiences. Trying to do so, in a down-to-earth way, both opted for a literal analysis of the biblical text. In their retrieval both had to measure themselves up with a limited access to the original Hebrew. Luther could handle some Hebrew when he composed his Lectures on Genesis, while Augustine had to rely on the available Latin translations. While Augustine had to live with a maimed text, Luther interpreted image and likeness as synonyms. Luther’s loom consists in the definition of likeness applied to the image. When the text of Gn 1:26–27 is used within the context of grace and justification, conversion and communion, such an over-simplification does lead to important consequences.

Unlike Augustine, Luther fused into one the two creation stories. He did not have to deal with Augustine’s predicament and sustain the facticity of two creation stories. Even without the know-how of current exegesis, Augustine kept them separate. While too literal an understanding of the narratives stimulated Augustine to come up with his theory of the rationes causales, it led Luther to condense as much as he could. He understood the humanity of Gn 1:26–27 to be Adam and Eve. Luther could therefore easily switch details from one creation account to the other:

> Here our opinion is supported: that the six days were truly six natural days, because here Moses says that Adam and Eve were created on the sixth day. ... Concerning the order of creation of man he will state in the following chapter that Eve was made sometime after Adam, not like Adam, from a clod of earth, but from his rib, which God took out of the side of Adam as he slept. ... These are acts requiring time, and they were performed on the sixth day. Here Moses touches on them briefly by anticipation. Later on he will explain them at greater length.43

The greatest fusion of horizons Luther brought about was that of uniting the creation God made with the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. Having done that, Luther could move from the Creator to the Redeemer – from the gift given to its loss through sin – and back with ease. He could combine the horizon of the Book of Nature with the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ. He could incorporate protology into eschatology, and vice-versa. All this must have meant a lot to his hearers, as they could easily follow how the various articles of the Creed fit together. The price to be paid was the mystification of the difference between image and likeness, between creation, sin and redemption, between nature and grace, something that Augustine did all he could to distinguish.
Through Christ, humanity has been born to hope in eternal life. The new creature will receive a far greater glory in Christ though the work of the Holy Spirit. Luther quoted 1 Cor 15:45: «The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.» In, his On Faith, Hope and Love, Augustine turned this into a riddle:

*God would have willed to preserve even the first man in that state of salvation in which he was created…. But since he did foreknow that man would make bad use of his free will – that is, that he would sin – God prearranged his own purpose so that he could do good to man, even in man’s doing evil.*

Were the theological concepts of «gift» and «grace» to be synonymous, should Christianity not be in dire need to rethink itself and its millennial tradition? Should not theology venture beyond its customary and cosy shores into the deep (Lk 5:4) and allow itself to be surrounded with the loving presence of God … in Christ … through the Spirit?

**NOTES**

2 Ibid. 3. 5. 9.
3 Augustine had already started working on The Trinity when he embarked on his new commentary. In his other theological masterpiece, The City of God, he often referred to humanity as being created in God’s image.
4 Luther published these sermons in two languages: Latin and Greek. The two texts are quite different in content and seem to have been addressed to different audiences. He could have meant the Latin version to a public who was more versed in theology than those for whom he wrote in German.
5 J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, H. T. Lehmann (edd.), *Luther’s Works*, VIII: Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 45–50, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 355; *Luthers Werke*, Weimar Ausgabe (WA) 44, 825, 10–12. Pelikan’s edition will be referred throughout as LW; just the date of the publication will be added whenever a volume is mentioned for the first time.
7 Augustine, *Retractationum libri duo* II, 24; Rotelle 167.
8 *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* I, 17, 34.
9 Augustine knew only a little Greek and could not read Hebrew.
10 «Veritas Dei per humanaam locutionem invitat ad fidem». *The Trinity*, IX, 12, 17; translated by S. McKenna (Washington DC: CUA, 1965).
11 The RSV translates Rom 10:17 as: «So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.» The Vulgate’s rendition is as follows: «Ergo fides ex auditu, auditus autem per verbum Christi.»
12 Cf footnote 6, above.
13 *Retractationes* II, 24; Rotelle 167.
14 *On Genesis: a Refutation of the Manichees*, I, 23, 41; Rotelle 64.
15 *The Trinity*, I, 7, 14.
16 *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, III, 19, 29. In XI, 59, 53, Augustine stated that both Gn 1:26 and Gn 3:22 referred «the use of the plural to the Trinity.»
17 *The Trinity*, VII, 6, 12.
18 Cf *ibid.*, XII, 6, 6–7. In IX, 2, 2, he referred to man as the «unequal» (*impar*) image of God.
19 Underlined are the differences in translation between Augustine’s Latin text and the RSV.
20 *On Genesis: a Refutation of the Manichees*, I, 17, 28; Rotelle 57.
21 *Ibid.*, I, 18, 29 and I, 19, 30, respectively; Rotelle 58.
22 *Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis*, 57–60.
23 *The Trinity*, VI, 6, 12.
27 LW I, 5; WA 42, 5, 15–17.
28 LW I, 5 and 5; WA 42, 3, 30–32 and 4, 42 – 5, 9.
29 «Scriptura sui ipsius interpres»: WA 7, 97, 23.
30 LW I, 5; WA 42, 5, 17–18.
31 J. G. Walch (ed.), *Dr. Martin Luther's Sammtliche Schriften* XX, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, N.D.), col. 856.
33 LW I, 56; WA 42, 42, 3–4.
34 LW I, 56; WA 42, 42, 21–22.
35 LW I, 68; WA 42, 51, 27–32.
36 «... ein bilde, das uns ehnlich und gleich ist»: WA 24, 51, 11–12. See footnote 4, above.
37 WA 24, 52, 8 – 53, 1.
38 LW I, 62–65; WA 42, 47, 8–11.
41 LW I, 60; WA 42, 45, 11–12.
43 LW I, 69–70; WA 42, 55, 14–21.
44 *Enchiridion de Fide, Spe et Charitate liber unus*, 28, 104.

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