

Luther and Women

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This seminar was in important respects a direct continuation of one conducted in Erfurt in 1983 under the same title, although the membership of the Seminar was not identical. The Erfurt seminar had surveyed the potential field of study broadly and comprehensively and identified a large range of questions requiring further study [LuJ 52 [1985], 294f]. In line with this the Oslo seminar chose to concentrate on a number of these precise issues and to explore them in greater depth.

Among these questions none was regarded as more important than a study of the development over time of Luther's own views on the subject of women. This was done over the first two days through a detailed analysis of Luther's interpretation of Genesis 1-3, from the »Scholia in librum Genesis« of 1519 to the »Genesisvorlesung« of 1535.

In 1519 Luther clearly assumed the existence of a hierarchical pattern in paradise with woman subject to man and antagonism between the sexes, though contrasting motifs could be discerned relating the subordination of women to the effects of the Fall.

In the sermons of 1523/24 the pre-Fall subordination of women was more explicit, and Eve's function seemed largely restricted to that of generation, the role of companionship common in the medieval tradition being notably absent. Adam's naming of Eve signified his having power over her and she was seen as lacking Adam's level of understanding because unlike him she had not learned directly from God. On the other hand there was no trace of the contempt of woman common in humanist circles. Eve was clearly identified as a creature of God, and notwithstanding the general thrust of these ser-

mons was described as *domina terrae*, sharing a ruling role with Adam.

The 1527 sermons were of special interest, being the first exposition of Genesis following Luther's own marriage, and the group looked for signs of the impact of this event on Luther's interpretation. Ironically one new emphasis, in contrast to the simple idealism of the 1519 tract on marriage, was a sober recognition of the element of suffering in the married state. The sermons also drew a contrast between Eve's earlier freedom and its loss — yet Eve herself seemed dispensable, the tragedy of the Fall being not that Eve ate but that she implicated Adam.

The second session was wholly devoted to a close study of the 1535 Genesis commentary. The editorial problems surrounding the text as identified by Peter Meinhold were noted but were not considered serious enough to compromise its status as a genuine source for Luther's own ideas. As with earlier texts, the 1535 lectures consistently maintained Eve's dignity as a creature of God, but the text went much further than earlier ones in identifying Adam and Eve as equal in paradise, exercising joint dominion as *rectores terrae, maris et aeris*.

At the same time enigmas remained. There was a puzzling ambiguity in the statement that Adam and Eve were equal »except in respect of sex«, while the use of the image of a »building« to describe Eve seemed to identify her thoroughly with the context of the home. Many traditional emphases persisted, including a strong emphasis on the strength of lust for which marriage provided a remedy and the use of the image of sun and moon (possibly derived from medieval commentators) to assert a hierarchical structure.

The third session was devoted to a concentrated study of one of the issues identified at Erfurt – a chronological analysis of the development of Luther's ideas specifically on women's sexuality, as distinct from his views on marriage, and Susan Karant-Nunn presented a working paper on this theme.

While medieval Catholic learned opinion on the female sex was more varied than often realised, and by no means uniformly misogynist, there was an almost universal tendency to attribute to woman a strong sexual drive and to identify her as intrinsically a seductress. By contrast, Luther often appeared to ascribe the sex drive predominantly to men, and in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 7 argued for marriage as an antidote to sin in masculine terms. But while Luther's proclivity for using male language and illustrations continued throughout his career, closer analysis reveals that from his earliest writings he identified lust with both Adam and Eve, and depicted it as a raging fire which must be kept within bounds, even within the marriage-bed.

In accordance with prevailing gynecological opinion Luther regarded the strength of women's desires as proportional to their possession of »seed and blood«, and saw these desires as finding relief through the agency of a husband. In fulfilling God's reproductive assignment women achieved and best chastity.

Even within marriage Luther saw sexuality as a force always threatening to get out of control, and while he removed arbitrary Catholic restrictions on the days and times of permitted sexual activity, he disapproved of anything such as nudity which was likely to increase arousal, and stressed the need for couples to strive for moderation and mutual consideration – a state which it seems Luther himself found it difficult to achieve.

While Luther's own experience of marriage was clearly very positive, he saw misfortune as

an inevitable aspect of the married state. Nor did his love for his wife mitigate his views on the weaker character of women, their greater responsibility for the Fall and their subordination. His own experience clearly showed him that marriage did not dampen so much as quicken desire, and after 1525 he was readier to retain the notion that some men have the ability to remain single yet pure. On the other hand even women who could remain virgins had a duty to wed and raise children.

Notwithstanding Luther's bald pronouncements concerning the inferiority of women and their submission to men, in the context of the rampant misogyny of the day he can be said to have promoted a better and more balanced image of the female by perceiving that desire was as characteristic of males as of females. Though sex even within marriage was perceived to involve sin, Luther's view was that God exempted it out of grace and did not hold the faithful accountable for sin. Thus Luther's fundamental theological views were extended to include the whole area of sexuality and marriage.

In the fourth session Jörg Haustein led a discussion on Luther's attitude to sorcery and witches – a subject largely ignored in Luther biography. Based on a doctoral dissertation defended in December 1987 at the University of Kiel, »Martin Luthers Stellung zum Zauber und Hexenwesen«, this presentation examined Luther's sermons on the Decalogue (1516-1518) and on Ex 22:18, his commentary on 1 P 3:6, his writing against Cardinal Albrecht von Brandenburg and some illustrative material.

Luther's sermons about the Decalogue (1516-1518) included a wide-ranging discussion on sorcery and witchcraft, based on late medieval and particularly on nominalist sources. The reality of malign sorcery was accepted within the context of the *permissio Dei*, but particular aspects of sorcery were rejected.

Haustein found that Luther distinguished between witchcraft, which was carried out with the aid of the Devil, and *magia naturalis*, such as augury and stargazing. Practitioners of *magia naturalis* could presumably read nature, but Luther disapproved on the grounds that God does not want people to know the things they learn by those means. As for popular attitudes to witchcraft, Luther doubted that witches had the power to fly or to change creatures into other forms, but accepted the popular opinion that they could sicken people, make women and animals abort, dry up milk and cause other misfortunes.

Although not actually involved himself in pursuing action against witches, Luther accepted such proceedings and did nothing to stop them, and he probably knew about the four executions of witches in Wittenberg in June 1540. His statements about witches from as early as 1516 express a somewhat negative idea of women, their predominance among witches being attributed to female inferiority, although the main basis of sorcery is identified as disobedience against God's commandments. It was significant also that in writing about witches Luther never associated them with midwives or sexuality: for him witchcraft was essentially an intellectual problem.

Luther und das religiöse Bild

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Das Seminar zielte auf die Wirkungen von Luthers »bilderfreundlicher« Haltung im Hinblick auf den religiösen Gebrauch von Bildern in der protestantischen Tradition. Dabei sollte ein vertieftes Verständnis von einer protestantischen Bildersprache entwickelt und deren Bei-

The seminar concluded its work with a sense of having increased its awareness of the complexity of Luther's attitudes rather than having reduced them to a straightforward pattern readily connected with his life experiences. In considering future directions, there was agreement on the need to move beyond textual analysis of Luther to a comprehensive attempt to build a context, as has been done for his theological concepts, by enlarging scholarly understanding of contemporary and antecedent sources and thereby helping to distinguish original perceptions from traditional material.

Such contextual work should include not only the attitudes of Renaissance thinkers and of the other Reformers but especially an exploration of the Nominalist traditions of scholastic thought in which Luther was nurtured.

Other matters which required attention included a closer analysis of Luther's relationships with individual women, the reception of his views about women, and the social framework of marriage laws (secular and ecclesiastical), divorce practices, and wills and inheritances. As with so many aspects of Luther studies, the ongoing process of discovery and analysis yields as many new questions as answers.

trag zu einer modernen Hermeneutik des Bildes erwogen werden. Die Arbeit im Seminar basierte auf Referaten, die den jeweiligen Forschungsinteressen der Teilnehmer entsprachen und die zentralen Problemkomplexe des Themas anhand eines Beispiels aufgriffen.