

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

### VOLUME 1 B. THE SCRIPTURES

## Genesis 1–3: a doctrinal statement

*Prepared by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations. Adopted by the General Synod, 1972 Convention.*

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After thorough and prayerful consideration of important issues regarding the interpretation of Genesis, chapters 1–3 in particular, the Lutheran Church of Australia and her public teachers accept the following statements as a God-pleasing, biblically and confessionally sound agreement, and reject all contrary teaching.

There exists today in Christendom a wide variety of approaches to the problems and issues involved in the interpretation of Genesis 1–3. Since the LCA confesses the doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of Holy Scripture, it is self-evident that she cannot permit within her ranks the same wide range of interpretations as that tolerated by churches which have abandoned any serious confession of the authority of the Scriptures.

In approaching the awesome realities revealed in the opening chapters of Genesis we do so with deep reverence and with a sense of the utter inadequacy of human wisdom before these mysteries. It is therefore **not** the purpose of the present statement to formulate one standard interpretation of Genesis 1–3, to resolve all problems and issues arising in this connection, or to settle all sorts of exegetical details. This is neither possible nor desirable. Our purpose is rather to confess the dogmatic substance of Genesis 1–3 in opposition to certain widely-held approaches and interpretations which run counter to the declared biblical-confessional commitment of the LCA. This in no way curtails legitimate exegetical freedom, but on the contrary safeguards its rightful boundaries.

We approach the whole matter from a biblically and confessionally determined perspective.

The Christian approach to Genesis is and must be determined by obedient and joyful confidence in Christ as God and Creator (John 1:1–4; Col 1:15–20) and in Scripture as His truthful Word.

Consequently we reject from the outset all approaches not based on this faith. We therefore find ourselves opposed to many assumptions of 'higher' criticism, assumptions which have increasingly shaped the methods and conclusions of biblical scholarship in the last two hundred years. Some of these assumptions are:

- a. That the biblical documents must be treated in principle like all other historical documents, without regard to their claim to inspiration and authority;
- b. That science, history, and other disciplines are valid and legitimate norms and standards by which the truthfulness and reliability of biblical statements can and must be judged;
- c. That the miraculous aspects of the witness of the biblical writers may be discounted as an element of primitive culture;
- d. That the Apostles' and even our Blessed Lord's own understanding and interpretation of particular texts of Scripture may in principle be regarded as defective or questionable, and as subject to progressive correction by subsequent biblical scholarship.

Such assumptions as these constitute an attack not only on the apostolicity of the Church (Eph 2:20), but on the very Lordship of Christ. For this reason we reject them unconditionally.

This does not mean that we reject either reason or scholarship. Quite on the contrary, we hold that it is the function of biblical interpretation to understand and apply the Bible as a whole and in all its parts. But everyone who takes the Reformation's *sola Scriptura* seriously must insist that the proper function of reason, and thus of scholarship, is in every respect **under** and not **over** Scripture – as handmaid, and not as mistress. As emphatically as we reject any use of reason as master or judge over Scripture, so we affirm the fullest use of reason, with all its scholarly tools, as a servant, to understand and make clear what the sacred text says and means.

## 1. LITERARY-HISTORICAL ASPECTS AND SOURCES

In keeping with the statement made earlier it is not the intention of this section to assert dogmatically what interpretation of these difficult chapters or what approach to an interpretation is alone possible within the Church. And the Theses of Agreement in Section I show how differences of interpretation must be distinguished from church divisive differences over doctrine.\* It is, however, necessary to state and confess what these chapters teach:

1. The creation *ex nihilo* – a creation from nothing – as a six-day work on the part of God.
2. The creation by God of the first man, Adam, and the woman, Eve; and the creation of man as a mature, rational, moral and responsible being in the image of God, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, endowed with a perfect knowledge of God's will and in blissful relationship with his Creator.
3. The Fall of man through an act of disobedience and unbelief, the consequent loss of the image of God, and the corruption of his nature (original sin).
4. The promise of the Saviour.

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\* The proper understanding of the seven days of Genesis 1, which has been much discussed over the years, is involved here. However, it is invalid to interpret the days in the interests of the evolutionary schemes ruled out in Section 2. Evolution below.

The statements of the chapters themselves are supported and confirmed especially by the whole thrust of the New Testament and many individual passages of it (Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:21ff and 45ff; 1 Cor 11:7–12; 1 Tim 2:13f). Clearly therefore the factual-historical framework of the Genesis narrative is the indispensable foundation not only for the history of the People of God which follows, but for the very Incarnation and Redemption. Within this framework figurative elements are no doubt to be found. But we must reject all interpretations which in any way undermine the facticity of the framework itself, e.g. the suggestion that the Creation and Fall of Adam and Eve may be taken to represent not actual persons and events, but timeless myths or parables of what happens to every man.

Whether the events of Genesis 1–3 should be called 'historical' depends on how that term is used. If 'historical' refers to what actually happened, then Genesis 1–3 is historical. But if 'historical' is taken to refer to what can be established in terms of human observations and reports, then Creation obviously stands outside the realm of the 'historical'. Since, however, the term 'un-historical' usually has the sense of 'not having happened', it would be very misleading, and hence not in keeping with the form of sound doctrine, to declare Creation and Fall to be unhistorical.

Sources of one kind or another undoubtedly lie behind the material of the Pentateuch, and the endeavour to isolate and examine these is part of the work of the Old Testament scholar. So also he must reckon with the fact or the possibility of post-Mosaic developments or additions. However, it is contrary to the form of sound doctrine

- a. to deny the revealed character of Israel's faith and to assume that Israel's 'religion' developed like any of the religions of surrounding and contemporary peoples;
- b. to reduce the stature of Moses, in opposition to the New Testament (John 1:17; the Transfiguration), by holding that the Pentateuch is not essentially Mosaic, or by questioning the historical value of what the Pentateuch attributes to him, or by denying that he wrote of Christ (John 5:45,46);
- c. to throw doubts in general on the historicity of the persons and facts mentioned in the Pentateuch.

Teachers of the Church are referred to the statement, 'The Theses of Agreement and Inerrancy', especially to rejections 2, 3 and 7 (page B1, B2) for the boundaries of their theological thinking and teaching.

## 2. EVOLUTION

Apart from other meanings irrelevant in this connection evolution can mean these three things:

1. In the broadest sense it is an all-embracing world-view, which regards the universe as self-existing and self-explanatory.
2. Usually evolution means the alleged development, by natural processes, of all forms of life, including man, from some common, primitive ancestral form. This 'amoeba-to-man' transformism is also known as macro-evolution.
3. Micro-evolution, by contrast, refers to changes within definite limits without any transformation of one basic type (e.g. reptiles) into another (e.g. birds).

For the sake of clarity, this statement will use the terms 'evolutionism' for (1), 'evolution' for (2), and 'genetic variation' for (3).

It is clear that evolutionism is an anti-Christian way of looking at the world. It is atheistic and basically materialistic, and expresses sinful man's instinctive flight from God (see Rom 1:18ff). It relativizes all moral absolutes, and inspires various philosophies, including demonic ideologies which have brought untold misery upon millions of human beings in our time.

Generic variation, this is also clear, has to do with indisputable facts and poses no problem to the Christian faith.

The situation is different with evolution. This theory of origins is part of the scientific enterprise of our day, and as such must be judged by scientific principles and adequate scientific knowledge. Qualified experts, however, continue to disagree whether evolution is an adequate interpretation of the relevant facts of whether it even contradicts them, or whether science is capable of settling the question of origins at all. Further, it must be pointed out that the exposition of evolution is usually associated with an anti-supernatural bias: any activity of God in the origin of the world, creation in any shape or form, is ruled out from the very outset. In this sense evolution and creation are opposites. This means that evolution as generally understood has much of the character of evolutionism about it, and its popularity is not unconnected with the widespread modern turning away from the Christian faith. In this view, the God of the First Article of the Creed, 'who has made me and all creatures and still preserves them', is irrelevant. There is no fall of man into sin, which would make necessary an act of redemption by the Son of God whom we confess in the Second Article. And the Spirit of the Third Article, 'the Lord and Giver of Life; becomes simply the power inherent in matter.

While evolution as usually understood is therefore clearly contrary to Scripture, it may be asked whether each and every form of evolutionary speculation must be ruled out on biblical grounds. Actually Scripture says very little about the mystery of the 'how' of creation, and where Scripture is silent the Church cannot dogmatize. If in such areas Christian thinkers suggest the possibility of some forms or aspects of evolution as God's means of creating, then differences of opinion about such views should be treated as non-doctrinal and therefore not divisive of church fellowship. The clear limits of this sort of speculation are the authority of Scripture generally, and the historicity of Adam and Eve in particular, as these doctrines are spelt out in some detail in the present document and in the statement, 'The Theses of Agreement and Inerrancy'.

It is clearly the duty of public teachers of the Church to help Christian students and others who are struggling with these far-reaching and perplexing issues. They must therefore equip themselves adequately, so that they 'can be counted on for both expounding the sound doctrine and refuting those who argue against it' (Titus 1:9 JB). In this confused age the Church must reflect serene confidence in Genesis as the Creator's own account of what happened in the beginning.