

AUGUSTANA'S BIBLICAL HERITAGE
 Augustana Heritage Association Gathering, June 21-24, 2012
 Theodore N. Swanson

The question of how Scripture is to be interpreted lies at the heart of many of the skirmishes of the cultural and political wars being waged today: creationism vs. evolution; gay marriage; life and death issues such as abortion and the death penalty; public policy on issues as diverse as immigration and the budget.

Do we, as children of Augustana, have a heritage that we can draw upon as we seek to study and use Scripture as “the revealed Word of God and the only infallible rule and standard of faith and practice,” as the Augustana statement of faith declared?

First of all, consider the Bible we knew and used. It wasn't the whole book. While I don't know which biblical books were read and studied in the sod hut on the Nebraska prairie where my maternal grandmother was born, I do know what Bible was heard in church. It was the lectionary of the Swedish Psalm Book of 1819.

To be sure, the Service usually began on an Old Testament note, with the cry of the seraphim in the temple in Isaiah's vision: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory,” and ended on an Old Testament note, with the Aaronic benediction from Numbers 6.

But in between, the New Testament was read and preached. In the three series of Epistles and Gospels in the Psalm Book and their English counterpart in the first English hymnal from the turn of the century, only five Old Testament lessons appear as the Epistle for the day: four from Isaiah: for Christmas Day, Epiphany, Annunciation, and the day of John the Baptist; and one from Malachi for Candlemas, all regarded as prophecies of the New Testament event observed on the day.

That changed with *The Hymnal* of 1925. Now there are forty-one Old Testament lessons as Epistles, mostly from Psalms and Isaiah,¹ not quite ten

¹ Ten in Series 1, twenty in Series 2, eleven in Series 3. Of the forty-one, eighteen are from Psalms, eleven from Isaiah, three from Genesis, the remaining nine scattered among seven books.

per cent of all the lessons in the lectionary. In addition, twenty Psalms are printed in a section of Psalms for Responsive Reading. Of the Gospels, Matthew is favored, with 36% of the Gospel readings; Mark trails badly, with only 7% of the total. It was only with the *Service Book and Hymnal* of 1958, Augustana's last hymnal, that the Old Testament finally gained a reading of its own for each Sunday and holy day, together with only the one historic series of Epistles and Gospels.²

Thus, we were a people formed by the New Testament, with the help of what were often regarded as prophecies of Christ in Psalms and Isaiah. The only Old Testament law we knew was the Ten Commandments. We focused on the life and work of Jesus and the teachings of Paul. We joined the Pocket Testament League, and carried with us the New Testament, often with Psalms included. Maybe the book of Isaiah should have been there as well. That was our working canon.

But how did we conceive of Scripture as the revealed Word of God? I suspect that most in the Augustana Synod would have agreed with the view of Scripture put forward in the series of tracts issued between 1909 and 1915 called *The Fundamentals*: that Scripture is infallible, verbally inspired, inerrant in the autographs, and to be interpreted literally. Higher criticism, that movement of the Enlightenment asking the questions of the Bible that would be asked of any other book concerning date, authorship, historical setting, and the intention of the author, and which began by questioning the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, was thought to be destructive of divine truth. The theory of evolution, which contradicted the creation stories in the first chapters of Genesis, was—and still is—anathema to many Christians. Geology, which posited a great age for the earth, far beyond Archbishop Ussher's calculation of creation in 4004 B.C., was suspect. In a 1922 article in *The Augustana Quarterly*,³ Seminary New Testament Professor Sven Youngert spoke of the “destructive criticism” of John Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, and Richard Simon, the men who first questioned the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. In a 1925 article in the *Quarterly*,⁴ the editor, J. A. Almer, declared: “The Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch is settled

² No Psalms are included in the Old Testament readings, but Isaiah comes in first in the number of readings with twenty-eight of the total of 102.

³ *The Augustana Quarterly*, 1:1922, pp. 217-18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:1925, pp. 372-73.

securely.... The day of experimental biblical criticism is drawing to a close.” It was a premature obituary.

Verbal inspiration was taught by Conrad Emil Lindberg, Professor of Dogmatics at the Seminary from 1890 until his death in 1930. In his *Christian Dogmatics* of 1923, he did reject mechanical verbal inspiration, in which the Holy Spirit dictated every word, in favor of dynamic verbal inspiration, in which “the Holy Spirit did not impart any new linguistic knowledge nor did he alter the literary ability of the writers, but cooperated with them....”⁵ That was the teaching at Augustana Seminary.

In the Augustana colleges, however, geologists were allowed to have their say. Joshua Lindahl taught geology at Augustana College from 1880 to 1888, leaving to become state geologist of Illinois. He was succeeded by J. A. Udden, a 1881 graduate of Augustana College, who taught at Bethany before coming to Augustana. Joshua Edquist taught geology at Gustavus Adolphus from 1887 to 1926. When Udden resigned at Augustana in 1911 to teach at the University of Iowa, his place was taken by his son, Anton Udden, and eventually, in 1924, by Fritiof Fryxell, a 1922 graduate of Augustana. In 1929, under Fryxell, a department of geology offering a major in geology was established at Augustana, the first department of geology in any Lutheran college in the United States. Indeed, other Lutheran colleges said of the Augustana colleges, “you teach the age of rocks; we teach the Rock of Ages.”⁶

Fryxell and my dad were classmates at Augustana College and good friends. In early 1929, Dad wrote to Fryxell in the wake of publicity surrounding the discovery of the skeleton of a mammoth on one of Fryxell’s field trips. He asked what stand Fryxell took in teaching geology at Augustana. Fryxell wrote a seven page reply,⁷ in which he said among other things:

I have come around to about this point of view. My God-given reason

⁵ Conrad Emil Lindberg, *Christian Dogmatics and Notes on the History of Dogma* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1923), p. 397.

⁶ I am indebted for this insight to Thomas Tredway, *Coming of Age: A History of Augustana College, 1935-1975* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana College, 2010), p. 46.

⁷ Letter to C. Bertram Swanson, March 25, 1929 (in the writer’s possession).

tells me that the fundamental principles upon which Science rests *must* be so; else it would be fine irony for the Creator to have given me a reasoning apparatus. Thus, since my earliest college days, I have been convinced of the futility of trying to deny evolution, the great age of the earth, the remoteness of the stars, and such fundamental concepts upon which Science stands agreed.... But I am equally convinced of the truth of religion, as attested by my Christian experience. And so I valiantly seek to serve the truth in these two fields, convinced that there can be no conflict between truth and truth.

Fryxell goes on to quote what my dad had said in his letter: “This beast you have discovered in Prophetstown is supposed to be 20,000 years old. According to what we have been taught the world isn’t that old. This is what I would like to get at.” Fryxell referred Dad to some books on geology to learn how to date the ice retreat of the last glacial epoch, but he also wrote of talks he had had with newer seminary faculty members who taught that the world was much older than 20,000 years. He admitted that Blomgren, my dad’s Old Testament Professor who had retired in 1926, had had “peculiar ideas,” and that Lindberg was “naïve about such matters.”

With regard to historical criticism, at the Seminary the situation changed with the massive shift in faculty that occurred at the beginning of the 1930s, with the coming of Conrad Bergendoff as Dean and Professor of Dogmatics, A. D. Mattson to teach Ethics and Sociology, Carl Anderson to teach Hebrew and Old Testament, and Eric Wahlstrom to teach Greek and New Testament.

Under Anderson and Wahlstrom, “historical criticism” was no longer a pejorative phrase at Augustana Seminary. We called Anderson *Hoshek*, Hebrew for “darkness,” but felt the light of faith that shone through his classroom prayers and the passion that characterized his teaching.. And as my intern supervisor, Lloyd Burke, once remarked, the notes from Wahlstrom’s classes were the ones you threw away last. But well worth keeping and reading today are Wahlstrom’s books, *The New Life in Christ*, his study on Paul, published in 1950, and *God Who Redeems: Perspectives in Biblical Theology*, published in 1962. Nor was teaching the Bible left to Anderson and Wahlstrom alone. Other members of the faculty were asked to teach a course or more in English Bible. A.D. Mattson taught Minor Prophets and Daniel. When Hjalmar Johnson came in 1944 it was to teach Philosophy of Religion and English Bible; he taught Job, Psalms, Galatians,

Pastoral Epistles, Catholic Epistles. Other faculty members taught other books, all employing historical-critical methods. As a result, Augustana Seminary was twenty years ahead of many other Lutheran seminaries in embracing historical critical methods of studying the Bible.

During this thirty-year period from 1930 to 1960, the year of Wahlstrom's retirement and Anderson's death, the teaching of Lutheran theology at the Seminary moved from 17th century Lutheran orthodoxy to Luther himself. These were the years of the rediscovery of Luther. In biblical studies this meant rediscovering the insight of Luther that Jesus Christ is the center of Scripture, that that which is truly important in Scripture is, in Luther's phrase, *was Christum treibet*, "what preaches, or, what drives, pounds home Christ." If the Bible is the Word of God, it is because through the Bible Christ, the living Word, the Word made Flesh, comes striding into our lives. That's why Luther could grade some biblical books as more important than others: Romans, Galatians, 1 Peter and the gospel of John in the New Testament; Psalms, Isaiah and Genesis in the Old. That's why he gave others, such as James and Esther, a failing mark. We don't have to agree with Luther on his evaluations—I think he erred on James; faith without works *is* dead—but we can agree in principle that the primary Word of God is the Living Word, Jesus Christ. As Luther once observed, the Bible is the manger in which Christ is laid. And there may be a lot of straw in the manger.

It is perhaps significant that in 1960, the Centennial Lecture at the Seminary was given by Professor Ragnar Bring of Lund University, Sweden, on "Luther's View of the Bible."⁸ He pointed out that just as Christ's real presence is given us in, through and under the elements of bread and wine, so the Bible gives us Christ's presence in, through, and under the words of the Bible. God's revelation requires earthly means, which can and should be studied historically and philologically. He points out that Luther's understanding of the Old Testament as a message of God's action with his chosen people and others enabled Luther to understand the New Testament in a new way. And, in learning to read the New Testament properly, "he could understand the Old, not as a book of moral rules, but as the history of salvation as preparation for Christ."⁹

⁸ Ragnar Bring, "The Centennial Lecture—Luther's View of the Bible," *Augustana Seminary Review*, 12:1960, no. 2 & 4, pp. 3-14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

I prefer the Augustana statement of faith that the Bible is “the revealed Word of God” to the wording of the ELCA statement, which speaks of “the inspired Word of God.” It emphasizes that through Scripture, Christ, the Word of God, is revealed, shown, exhibited to us. Indeed, we should view the phrase “the Word of God” as an objective genitive: the Word, both as Scripture and as Christ, is the word of what God is doing on our behalf. Ultimately, the Bible is not a book of rules, and should not be taken as such. It is a message: the good news that reveals to us that God is alive and active, and that God has acted for us in Jesus Christ. It is a message that we need to hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest in our own day. I hope that is our Augustana biblical heritage.