

Creation Accommodated to Evolution: Hermann Sasse on Genesis 1–3

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In much of Western Christendom, the words of Scripture are no longer accepted as ultimate authority in and of themselves. What has led to this is a long process of European philosophies and worldviews going back to the seventeenth century.¹ Since the late nineteenth century, it has especially been Darwin's theory of evolution that has presented a challenge to many Christians and has led them to reject biblical authority, since macro-evolution has come to be viewed as fact and as incompatible with the account of creation in Genesis 1–3. Responding to the new science, Christians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reacted in essentially three ways. First, the orthodox rejected or relativized science wherever it conflicted with Scripture as traditionally understood. Second, many attempted to adjust Christian theology to allow the results of science to stand. Third, many made a wall between theology and science, in such a way that the two realms became non-overlapping magisterial authorities.² Robert Preus grouped the widely varying twentieth-century exegeses of Genesis 1–3 into two groups: those who regard Genesis 1–3 as an account of what really happened, and those who disbelieve that it could possibly describe what really happened.³ The latter group often consisted of Lutherans who attempted to reject biblical inspiration and inerrancy (and thus its

¹ Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology: Origins and Problems of Biblical Criticism in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. John Bowden (London; Philadelphia: SCM Press; Trinity Press International, 1990).

² Frederick Gregory, *Nature Lost?: Natural Science and the German Theological Traditions of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); Frederick Gregory, "The Impact of Darwinian Evolution on Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century," in *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 369–390; Keith E. Yandell, "Protestant Theology and Natural Science in the Twentieth Century," in *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 448–471. Yandell gives four categories instead of three, but I regard his second and fourth categories as having the same approach: adjusting Christian theology so that it fits the new science.

³ Robert D. Preus, "Biblical Hermeneutics and the Lutheran Church Today [1966]," in *Doctrine Is Life: The Essays of Robert D. Preus on Scripture*, ed. Klemet I. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 149.

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plenary authority) while still maintaining a semblance of standing in the mainstream of the Lutheran tradition. They did this, first, by making a false caricature of the Lutheran Orthodox position, and second, by asserting the non-inspiration and errancy of Scripture.⁴

In many ways, these false views were opposed by Hermann Sasse (1895–1976). Sasse deserves, in my opinion, to be considered the twentieth-century church father of confessional Lutheranism. No one else in the twentieth century had the theological depth, confessional Lutheran commitment, and global influence as did Sasse. His life interacted with all the important theological movements of the century. On most theological issues, he was the representative lonely voice calling Lutheran churches and all Christians to greater faithfulness.

Yet Sasse was a critic of the Lutheran Orthodox doctrine of Scripture’s verbal inspiration and of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s doctrine of biblical inerrancy.⁵ Some think that Sasse changed his views by 1951 to agree essentially with verbal inspiration and biblical inerrancy,⁶ but others say that his change was more in the way of how he expressed himself—that he avoided controversial expressions like “errors in Scripture” without substantially moving away from his previous position.⁷ Even if Sasse substantially changed his views, the question remains,

⁴ Preus, 170–174. He notes that Werner Elert and Robert Scharlemann did the former, Warren Quabeck and Karl Barth did the latter, and Gerhard Forde did both.

⁵ Hermann Sasse, “On the Doctrine *De Scriptura Sacra* [Letter 14, June 1950],” in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison, trans. Ralph Gehrke, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 240–286; Hermann Sasse, “What Does Luther Have to Say to Us on the Inerrancy of the Holy Scripture? [Letter 16, Christmas 1950],” in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison, trans. Ralph Gehrke, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 331–366.

⁶ Jeffrey J. Kloha, “Hermann Sasse Confesses the Doctrine *De Scriptura Sacra*,” in *Scripture and the Church: Selected Essays of Hermann Sasse*, ed. Jeffrey J. Kloha and Ronald R. Feuerhahn, Concordia Seminary Monograph Series 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1995), 337–423; Kurt E. Marquart, “Hermann Sasse and the Mystery of Sacred Scripture,” in *Hermann Sasse: A Man for Our Times?*, ed. John R. Stephenson and Thomas M. Winger (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995), 167–193; John R. Stephenson, “Hermann Sasse’s Influence on Confessional Lutheranism in North America since 1945,” in *Der Theologe Hermann Sasse (1895–1976): Einblicke in seine internationale Wirkung als Exeget, Kirchenhistoriker, Systematiker und Ökumeniker*, ed. Werner Klän, Oberurseler Hefte. Ergänzungsband 24 (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2020), 133–146.

⁷ Simon Volkmar, “Volles Gotteswort und volles Menschenwort. Hermann Sasses Beitrag zu einem lutherischen Verständnis der Heiligen Schrift,” in *Der Theologe Hermann Sasse (1895–1976): Einblicke in seine internationale Wirkung als Exeget, Kirchenhistoriker, Systematiker und Ökumeniker*, ed. Werner Klän, Oberurseler Hefte. Ergänzungsband 24 (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2020), 50–71; Simon Volkmar, “Lutherisches Schriftprinzip im 21. Jahrhundert: Impulse von Hermann Sasse,” *Evangelische Theologie* 79, no. 2 (2019): 130–144; Gottfried Wachler, *Die Inspiration und Irrtumslosigkeit der Schrift: eine dogmengeschichtliche und dogmatische Untersuchung zu H. Sasse, Sacra Scriptura*, *Biblicums* skriftserie 4 (Uppsala: Stiftelsen Biblicum, 1984), 9–11, 72–93; Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, “Hermann Sasse und sein Ringen um die Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” *Lutherische Blätter* 32 (1980): 1–51. While Volkmar is aware of Sasse’s change

“Changed to what?” For example, while Jeffrey Kloha demonstrated clearly that Sasse changed his position on inerrancy, “the question is the extent of the change.”⁸ Thus we still have different, irreconcilable views of Sasse on Scripture: the German-speaking restricted-inerrancy Sasse and the English-speaking, unrestricted-inerrancy Sasse.

Perhaps part of the reason for this difference of opinion is that Sasse’s claims for the truth of *evolution* were published only in German during his lifetime. Examining Sasse on biblical inerrancy and authority, and how to deal with contemporary scientific theories, such as evolution, is of the utmost importance today, no less than it was at Sasse’s time.⁹

Sasse’s Early Views on Creation

In 1932, Sasse denied that the creation narrative in Genesis 1–3 was historical, and therefore he claimed that the unity of the human race was neither anthropological-biological nor historical, but only theological. “The unity of the human race, the noteworthy *ex henos* (‘from one,’ Acts 17:26) cannot be understood in an anthropological-biological manner nor in a historical manner. . . . There is knowledge of the one humanity only where it is known that humanity is the creation of God (Mark 16:15).”¹⁰ In this passage, he seems to say that only the church knows

in attitudes on inerrancy, he still uses Letter 14 “On the Doctrine *De Scriptura Sacra*” (1950) when presenting Sasse’s views on Scripture.

⁸ Kloha, “Hermann Sasse Confesses the Doctrine *De Scriptura Sacra*,” 415; see also Stephenson, “Hermann Sasse’s Influence on Confessional Lutheranism in North America since 1945,” 139–140. Marquart claimed that by 1970, Sasse rejected the idea that the biblical writers retained their limitations of worldview and wrote non-factual statements on history, science, geography, and the like. Marquart, “Hermann Sasse and the Mystery of Sacred Scripture,” 176–177. According to Simon Volkmar, the kind of inerrancy that the mature Sasse affirmed was that there are no errors in the Bible “ontologically,” even though there appear to be errors “phenomenologically.” Moreover, besides these apparent errors, Sasse stressed even after 1951 that some statements of the biblical authors remain stuck in an antiquated worldview. These are the “human aspects” of Scripture that continued to alienate Sasse from other confessional Lutherans. Volkmar, “Volles Gotteswort und volles Menschenwort,” 60–61.

⁹ See Michael Young, “On the Need for a Thoughtful, Distinctively Lutheran Perspective on Creation,” *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 30, no. 3 (Holy Trinity 2021): 35–40; Charles P. Arand, “A Travel Guide to the Evangelical Creation Debates: Introduction,” *Concordia Theology* (blog), December 12, 2017, <https://concordiatheology.org/2017/12/evangelical-creation-debates-travel-guide/>; Benjamin T. G. Mayes, “Creation, Science, and God’s Omnipotence,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (2018): 290–301.

¹⁰ “Die Einheit des Menschengeschlechts, das merkwürdige *ex henos* (von einem), Apg. 17,26, ist weder anthropologisch-biologisch noch historisch zu verstehen. . . . Von der *einen* Menschheit weiß man nur da, wo man von der Menschheit als der kreature Gottes (Mark. 16,15) weiß.” Hermann Sasse, “Die Ökumenische Bewegung,” *Kirchliches Jahrbuch* 59 (1932): 532; cited in Hopf, “Hermann Sasse und sein Ringen,” 10. My translation; emphasis original.

about the unity of humanity, but one should notice the reason: because such a unity is not in the realm of biology or history.

The next year Sasse rejected the historicity of Genesis 1–3 and went further to accept an eternal world and an eternally ongoing creation.

The *primeval history* of which the first chapters of the Bible speak is not history in the normal sense of the word. The creation of the world lies before and above all history. . . . We cannot categorize the beginning of time and space in our spacial-temporal view of the world. Creation is a supratemporal event. It is still happening. . . . We also cannot place the date of the fall into sin into a historical chronology because we cannot conceive of that “then” when we all—we who were not yet born—sinned “in Adam.”¹¹

Thus, in the years before his shift to a form of biblical inerrancy, Sasse read Genesis 1–3 as figurative, non-historical, denying even the biological unity of the human race.

“Toward Understanding the Six Days of Creation” (1953)

By 1951, Sasse was distancing himself from his earlier essays on Scripture, in which he held open the possibility of minor “errors” in Scripture. How did this new view of scriptural inerrancy affect his views on creation? In his 1953 open letter to Lutheran pastors, “Toward Understanding the Six Days of Creation,” he addressed the question of how to understand the six days of creation in a modern scientific age of atomic science, astrophysics, and modern geology. In this letter, he claims that Christians from the early church through the ages have followed the “apologetic solution” of trying to reconcile Genesis 1–2 with their contemporary views of the world. Luther’s approach was not so much to affirm the literal sense of Scripture. Rather, Luther, too, adapted his exegesis to fit the philosophical view of the world that he held, according to Sasse. Sasse rejects this approach.¹²

¹¹ “Die *Urgeschichte*, von der die erseten Kapitel der Bibel reden, nicht Geschichte im gewöhnlichen Sinne des Wortes ist. Die Schöpfung der Welt liegt vor und über aller Geschichte. . . . Wir können den Anfang der Zeit und des Raumes nicht in unser raum-zeitliches Weltbild einordnen. Schöpfung ist ein überzeitliches Geschehen. Sie geschieht heute noch. . . . Wir können auch nicht das Datum des Sündenfalls in eine Zeittafel der Geschichte einordnen, weil wir uns jenes ‘Damals’ nicht denken können, als wir alle—wir, die wir noch nicht geboren waren—‘in Adam’ sündigten.” Hermann Sasse, *Das Volk nach der Lehre der evangelischen Kirche*, Bekennende Kirche 20 (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1934), 21–22; cited in Hopf, “Hermann Sasse und sein Ringen,” 7. My translation; emphasis original.

¹² Hermann Sasse, “Toward Understanding the Six Days of Creation [Letter 33, Mid-November 1953],” in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, ed. and trans. Matthew C. Harrison, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia, 2014), 280–284; Hermann Sasse, “Zum Verständnis des Sechstageswerks [Brief 33, Nov. 1953],” *Lutherische Blätter* 6, no. 34 (1954): 16–19.

Another way of understanding the creation account is to take it as “myth” or “saga,” as Karl Barth does. Sasse does not quite affirm this approach, but says that all pagan myths about the beginning of the world must be taken seriously, and by comparing and contrasting Genesis 1 with them, the meaning of the six days of creation becomes clear. For Sasse, the meaning is this: a real creation, a strict distinction between creation and Creator, and creation from nothing.¹³ Other details of the creation account are apparently not doctrinal and thus unimportant. Although he uses a comparison with myths to understand the content of Genesis 1, Sasse insists it is not myth.

The Bible speaks, in distinction from myth or saga, of what has actually happened in the creation of the world. It speaks not on the basis of human wisdom, human research and thinking, or a religious “divination,” which still always remains in the realm of human reason. It speaks on the basis of actual, genuine inspiration. . . . It is not a human word like the myth and the saga, and even like the utterance of the deepest human perceptions is and remains a human word. Rather, it is God’s Word in the strict sense, not a figurative sense, and therefore it is the word of eternal truth.¹⁴

Here Sasse defines “myth” and “saga” as that which is the word of man. By this definition, Genesis 1 cannot be myth or saga, even though it is comparable to myth and in other respects has mythical features.

The third approach that Sasse rejects is the attempt to let bad science make assertions about the origin of the world when it does not stay within the limits of demonstrable knowledge. At the same time, he warns against the attempts of some Christians to find proof for the creation or the existence of God from modern scientific findings. This sort of natural theology is impossible. Thus there are limits to science.¹⁵

Instead of the apologetic, mythological, or natural-science approaches to creation, Sasse wants creation to be a “pure article of faith,”¹⁶ by which he means

¹³ Sasse, “Six Days of Creation,” 284–285; Sasse, “Zum Verständnis des Sechstageswerks,” 19–21.

¹⁴ “Die Bibel redet im Unterschied vom Mythos oder der Sage von dem, was wirklich geschehen ist in der Schöpfung der Welt. Sie redet nicht auf Grund menschlicher Weisheit, menschlichen Forschens und Denkens oder einer religiösen ‘Divination,’ die doch immer im Bereich der menschlichen Vernunft bleibt. Sie redet auf Grund wirklicher, echter Inspiration. . . . Es ist nicht Menschenwort wie der Mythos und die Sage, und wie auch das Aussprechen tiefster menschlicher Erkenntnisse Menschenwort ist und bleibt. Sondern es ist Gottes Wort im strengen, nicht bildlichen Sinne und darum das Wort der ewigen Wahrheit.” Sasse, “Zum Verständnis des Sechstageswerks,” 21, my translation; cf. Sasse, “Six Days of Creation,” 285.

¹⁵ Sasse, “Six Days of Creation,” 286–288; Sasse, “Zum Verständnis des Sechstageswerks,” 21–24.

¹⁶ Sasse, “Six Days of Creation,” 288; Sasse, “Zum Verständnis des Sechstageswerks,” 24.

one that can only be believed, not one that can in any way be verified by observation. That is, just as the last things are not yet experienced and are expressed in Scripture using figurative language, so also the biblical account of creation is figurative and does not describe things that could be perceived with the senses. So then, what is the actual doctrinal content of the creation account? It is only theological. It tells us about God and his acts, not details about the world.¹⁷ We should notice here that Sasse wants to reduce the doctrinal content of Genesis 1 in such a way that it will not make assertions about the natural world, even though God's *actions* included creating *the world*. This is similar to the attempt by some to posit theology and science as non-overlapping magisterial authorities.

To assert that the six days were not "natural days," Sasse points to the fact that days one to three lacked sun and moon, and that on the seventh day God "rested."¹⁸ Yet Sasse still affirms that there must be some reality underlying the figurative speech of Genesis 1.

There really is a "firmament" even if we cannot account for it in our worldview. It is really so that man did not develop from the animal world, but stepped forth into existence through an inconceivable miracle of creation, even if we cannot perceive how this was so. It is really so that in the beginning a pair of human beings existed, and that the first Adam is precisely as much of a reality as the second Adam, even if we, who live on this side of the fall, cannot conceive of those who lived before the fall.¹⁹

Notable in this quotation is that Sasse affirms the non-evolutionary creation of mankind and an original pair of human beings. This seems to be a correction to his earlier published views. As we shall see, however, it is a position to which he did not continue to hold. He would express more openness to evolution later.

On the basis of the first things being indescribable, like the last things, Sasse asserts that they necessarily could *only* be described in figurative language. "Thus we will also have to accept that some words on the first things were said in figurative speech, which no one will deny for Gen. 2:7. With this the reality of what is recounted is not denied."²⁰ Thus, according to Sasse, the formation of man from dust and breathing the breath of life into his nostrils (Gen 2:7) is figurative language, but there is some reality behind this picture language. But what is this reality that Sasse will not deny? He apparently denies the dust, nostrils, and breath, and then does not identify what reality lurks behind the figurative language.

¹⁷ Sasse, "Six Days of Creation," 289; Sasse, "Zum Verständnis des Sechstageswerks," 25.

¹⁸ Sasse, "Six Days of Creation," 289; Sasse, "Zum Verständnis des Sechstageswerks," 25.

¹⁹ Sasse, "Six Days of Creation," 289; Sasse, "Zum Verständnis des Sechstageswerks," 25.

²⁰ Sasse, "Zum Verständnis des Sechstageswerks," 26, my translation; cf. Sasse, "Six Days of Creation," 290, which is missing the last sentence of the quotation.

At this point, Sasse appeals explicitly to the principle of accommodation to support his figurative reading of the creation history.

He [God] caused the biblical writers to speak in the language that their readers could understand. He did not, as the books of Enoch claim for themselves, reveal to them a new cosmology, but revealed the miracle of creation to them in such a way as they could express it under the presupposition of the contemporary view of the structure of the cosmos. As a Catholic theologian rightly noted concerning their view of the starry heaven: "Here, too, the grace of inspiration obviously did not elevate them above the secular knowledge of their age. . . . The fact that the Bible speaks to us in this way is a *synkatabasis* ("condescension"), of which Chrysostom speaks as being a parallel to the condescension of the *Logos* in the incarnation, e.g., in the homily on Gen. 2:7: "Behold, with what a condescension of words He instructs us, which He used on account of our weakness."²¹

That is, God accommodated biblical revelation not just to the way phenomena appear but also to outdated views of the world, though Sasse is careful not to call the premodern views of the world "errors" here. Here we also see how closely linked is the concept of accommodation with the incarnation. As we shall see, Sasse often uses an incarnational analogy for Scripture: it is both fully divine and fully human. When he speaks this way, the "human side" of Scripture often includes an accommodation of divine revelation to human ways of speaking and even to outmoded, erroneous views of the world.

At the end of his essay on the six days of creation, Sasse asks whether there can be any real conflict between theology and natural science. His answer: "No. There cannot be any such conflict if each of the two disciplines 'remains with its topic'."²² While this seems like an assertion of non-overlapping magisterial authorities, Sasse does not give totally free reign to science. Specifically, science is not competent to

²¹ "Er [Gott] hat die biblischen Schriftsteller in der Sprache reden lassen, die ihre Leser verstehen konnten. Er hat ihnen nicht, wie es die Henochbücher für sich beanspruchen, eine neue Kosmologie offenbart, sondern er hat das Wunder der Schöpfung ihnen so offenbart, wie sie es unter der Voraussetzung der damaligen Anschauung von der Struktur des Kosmos aussprechen konnten. Wie ein katholischer theologe von ihrer Anschauung vom Sternenhimmel richtig bemerkt: 'Die Inspirationsgnade hat sie offenbar auch hier nicht über das Profanwissen ihrer Zeit hinaufgehoben' . . . Daß die Bibel so zu uns redet, das ist jene 'synkatabasis' ('condescensio'), von der *Chrysostomos* als einer Parallele zur Herablassung des Logos in der Fleischwerdung redet, z.B. Homilie zu Gen. 2:7: 'Sieh, mit welcher herablassung der Worte, die er um unserer Schwachheit willen gebraucht, . . . er uns belehrt.'" Sasse, "Zum Verständnis des Sechstageswerks," 26, my translation, emphasis original; cf. Sasse, "Six Days of Creation," 290.

²² "Nein. Es kann einen solchen Konflikt nicht geben, wenn jede der beiden Wissenschaften 'bei der Sache bleibt'." Sasse, "Zum Verständnis des Sechstageswerks," 27, my translation, emphasis original; cf. p. 26; cf. Sasse, "Six Days of Creation," 290–291.

judge about miracles and cannot deny their existence. On the other hand, theology must not make a Christian astronomy, geology, or paleontology based on the creation history.²³

So how did Sasse's new view of scriptural inerrancy affect his views on creation? First, human evolution seems to be rejected, and this is a change from his earlier published views. Second, Genesis 1–2 is still viewed as non-literal, figurative language. Like the genre of "myth" or "saga," there is some theological truth behind the figurative language. Sasse redefines "myth" as that which is the word of man, and this puts "myth" into a totally different category from Scripture, as though by definition God could not use myth as part of his revelation. (Here Sasse obfuscates. He is using words in a new way to avoid the conclusion that he still treats Genesis 1–2 as myth.) This identification of the creation account as non-literal is supported next by invoking the principle of accommodation and the incarnational analogy. Thus, it seems as if Sasse has substantively changed one part of his earlier views (human evolution), but otherwise accommodation allows him to treat Genesis 1–2 as he had previously, while not denying the inerrancy of Scripture.

Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift (ca. 1968)

So far no one has analyzed what Sasse said in the completed chapters of what was to be his definitive book on the doctrine of Scripture, his *Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift* (posthumous). In at least the last decade of his life, or at least until 1968,²⁴ Sasse was working on this book, which he never finished, but which was published after his death in 1981.²⁵ Chapter 6 of the *Studien* is entitled "Toward

²³ Sasse, "Zum Verständnis des Sechstageswerks," 27; Sasse, "Six Days of Creation," 291.

²⁴ This date is established by Sasse's quotation (p. 106) of a work published in 1968, which came to him after he had already finished that particular chapter.

²⁵ Hermann Sasse, "Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift," in *Sacra scriptura: Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (Erlangen: Verlag der Ev.-Luth. Mission, 1981), 9–154. The editors of this volume report that the posthumous chapters were conceived as a whole, and were being worked on by Sasse until the end of his life. By the mid-1960s, some chapters were already fit for printing. Hans-Siegfried Huß, "Nachwort des Bearbeiters," in *Sacra scriptura: Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift*, by Hermann Sasse, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (Erlangen: Verlag der Ev.-Luth. Mission, 1981), 361–362. According to Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, Sasse was working intently on this book during his last years. His program was outlined in his essay on Augustine's doctrine of inspiration: first destructive, then constructing a new doctrine of inspiration. [Hermann Sasse, "Toward Understanding Augustine's Doctrine of Inspiration [Letter 29, February 1953]," in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison, trans. Ralph Gehrke, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia, 2014), 203–224; Hermann Sasse, "Sacra Scriptura: Bemerkungen zur Inspirationslehre Augustins," in *Festschrift Franz Dornseiff zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Horst Kusch (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1953), 262–273; Hermann Sasse, "Zur Inspirationslehre Augustins [Brief 29, Feb. 1953]," *Lutherische Blätter* 5, no. 31 (1953): Beilage.] The introductory chapter "On the Word of God" was not done as of December 3, 1968. Other parts were essentially the same as the Australian unity theses. Hopf, "Hermann Sasse und sein Ringen,"

Understanding the Biblical Primeval Revelation.”²⁶ It is the longest chapter of the book. Based on internal evidence, this chapter most likely was finished by 1968.²⁷ Kurt Marquart suggested the book was never completed because by the end of his life Sasse realized it was an impossible task to find a defensible middle position between the Lutheran Church’s historic doctrine of inerrancy and modern critical views of Scripture.²⁸ Our interest is in the sixth chapter, where Sasse presents extensive reflections on Genesis 1–3.

Foundational Matters

Section A of chapter 6 deals with foundational matters for understanding the Bible’s primeval revelation. According to Sasse, modern exegetes regard Genesis 1–11 as the *Urgeschichte* (“primeval history”), identifying the God who called Abraham as the Creator of heaven and earth. This primeval history is the necessary context for the whole Bible. Without it we cannot rightly understand the fall into sin, Christ as the new Adam, and Pentecost, for example.²⁹ One of Sasse’s foundational observations deals with how to understand the details of Scripture. Scripture in many places presents multiple versions of historical narratives with differing details. “This begins with the two creation accounts,” he says.³⁰ These differing details cannot and should not be harmonized, but neither should they be viewed as the accidents of careless redactors.³¹ Yet since there are two conflicting creation accounts, according to Sasse (1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–25), it would be absurd to construct a “cosmology” from the beginning of Genesis. The biblical statements about the created world are, in part, thoughts common to humanity, “figurative, poetic speech, not the language of dogmatic cosmology.”³²

43–45; cf. Lutheran Church of Australia, “The Theses of Agreement and Inerrancy: Adopted by the Lutheran Church of Australia, Convention, October 20–26, 1972,” *The Springfielder* 37, no. 2 (September 1973): 84–88.

²⁶ “Zum Verständnis der biblischen Uroffenbarung.”

²⁷ A footnote indicates that after finishing this “Abschnitt” [“section”], Sasse received a journal article from the 1968 volume of the *Harvard Theological Review*. Because he had already finished this section, he included a summary of the new article not in the body text but in a footnote. This suggests that the chapter may have been finished by 1968 or 1969. Even if this comment refers only to section F of chapter 6, this was the last section of the chapter, and no dates later than 1968 are found in the entire chapter. Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 106 n. 19.

²⁸ Marquart, “Hermann Sasse and the Mystery of Sacred Scripture,” 176–177.

²⁹ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 45. All English translation of this work are my own.

³⁰ “Das beginnt mit beiden Schöpfungsberichten.” Sasse, 46.

³¹ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 46, cf. 108.

³² “bildliche, poetische Sprache, nicht die Sprache dogmatischer Kosmologie.” Sasse, 46.

Even when the Lord Jesus used such language about the created world, such as in Mark 13:24–27 about the end of the world, he was merely using such language.³³ In his state of humiliation, the Lord was limiting himself to the human knowledge of the world that was available at the time. Sasse writes:

This is picture language, which cannot be translated into dogmatic propositions about the structure of the universe. The fact that Jesus in His days on earth did not know everything, that instead part of the estate of His humility included that He, the eternal Son of God, also took upon Himself the limitations of human knowledge, is stated by Himself in the very next verse: “But about the day and the hour no one knows, not the angels in heaven, nor even the Son, but only the Father (v. 32).”³⁴

Here Sasse again uses the principle of accommodation. It is based on the state of humiliation, and Sasse extends it far wider than Mark 13:32—the Last Day. Here it is applied to all of the Lord Jesus’ statements about the created world. One could then ask why the same principle should not be applied to what the Lord says about everything else. Why not say that Jesus accommodated his speech or knowledge to the errors and superstitions of his Jewish audience, as was asserted in the Enlightenment?³⁵ Sasse does not go that far, but it is unclear why he would apply accommodation to creation, but not to other articles of faith.

Commenting on the creation of the stars in Genesis 1:16, Sasse shows he thinks that astronomical distances entail an old age of the world. “Moreover the stars”—this comprehends the immense universe with its billions of galaxies with an expanse that can be measured only with light-years and the corresponding measures of time.”³⁶ Here we should note his assumption: stars shining millions of light-years away requires a universe at least millions of years old. Sasse apparently assumes that the laws of physics must always remain constant.

Sasse also turns to the history of doctrine for a fundamental aspect of how the creation account should be understood. Noting that modern natural science and technology arose nowhere else but in Christian Europe, Sasse says this is because

³³ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 47.

³⁴ “Dies ist Bildersprache, die man nicht in dogmatische Propositionen über die Struktur des Weltalls übersetzen kann. Daß auch Jesus in seinen Erdentagen nicht alles gewußt hat, daß es vielmehr zu dem Stand seiner niedrigkeit gehört, daß er, der ewige Gottessohn, auch Schranken menschlichen Wissens auf sich genommen hat, das sagt er ja gerade selbst in dem nächsten Vers: ‘Von dem Tage aber und der Stunde weiß niemand, auch die Engel im Himmel nicht, auch der Sohn nicht, sondern allein der Vater’ (V. 32).” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 47.

³⁵ See below, the section “Accommodation to Error.”

³⁶ “Dazu auch die Sterne”—das umfaßt das unermeßliche Universum mit seinen Milliarden von Galaxien mit einer Ausdehnung, die nur mit Lichtjahren gemessen werden kann und den entsprechenden Zeitmaßen.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 48.

Christianity never dogmatized a particular natural-scientific view of the world.³⁷ Here he must mean “in the early church and middle ages,” because it is not hard to find examples in the early modern era of church discipline being applied for deviance in one’s view of the world (the most famous example being Galileo’s trial before the Inquisition in 1633). In any case, an easy response is that when there are no challenges, the church does not make a dogma. Churchly dogmas are the result of conflict and intense study of Scripture.

Nevertheless, with his assertion that Christianity never dogmatized a view of the world, Sasse concludes that the great tragedies of church history include the condemnation of the Copernican view of the world, and the defense of a geocentric model of the solar system, which was defended by the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed churches in the early modern era.³⁸ Sasse singles out Francis Pieper as one who continued to hold a geocentric view of the world—an egregious example of naïveté about natural science. To Sasse, Pieper’s theology on creation is “barbaric.”³⁹

Thus the foundational aspects for Sasse’s examination of Genesis 1–3 include the following. The first eleven chapters of Genesis set the context for the whole Bible. There are multiple variant narratives of the creation account (which he calls the “law of parallels”).⁴⁰ The Bible includes no scientific cosmology. Biblical language about the created world is accommodated to the worldview of ancient people. And despite lamentable episodes in church history when a world picture was dogmatized, there actually is no classic Christian dogma concerning any view of the world. With these as his foundations, what will Sasse find when he investigates the details?

The Creation of Mankind

Section B of “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift” deals with the creation of mankind. In this section, Sasse argues that the creation accounts of Genesis 1–2 cannot be reconciled with each other, and thus cannot be read literally. While he rejects atheistic evolution, he is open to theistic evolution, and with this in mind he sees the theological message of the creation account as including a close connection of mankind with the rest of creation.⁴¹ Sasse begins the section by asserting that the “law of parallels” is applicable in Genesis 1–2. Genesis 1:1–2:4a cannot be

³⁷ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 50.

³⁸ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 52–53.

³⁹ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 53. Sasse refers to Franz Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924), 578 n. 1454b; Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 474 n. 11.

⁴⁰ “Gesetz der Parallelen.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 55, see also 102–103.

⁴¹ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 55–62.

harmonized with Genesis 2:4b–25. In literary style, they differ. Also the events of the creation of Eve and the fall into sin do not fit into the six-day creation of Genesis 1:1–2:4a. As proof for the latter assertion, Sasse points to Genesis 2:19, where the creation of animals apparently comes later than the creation of Adam. Likewise he says it would be too quick if the creation of Eve and the fall happened all on the original Friday.⁴² “The holy primeval history becomes a film played in a racing hurry.”⁴³

By means of a figurative reading of Genesis 1–2, Sasse then opens himself to the possibility of evolution.

These chapters, which speak of things that lie beyond all experience and all human abilities of imagination, contain figures of speech and images that we are unable to explain. We do not doubt that God made man from a “clod of dirt” [Gen 2:7] but we are unable to say what this clod of dirt was. What if it was a living being that had come forth from the animal world, which God had predestined to become man, the bearer of His own image?⁴⁴

Besides entertaining the possibility of human evolution from beasts, here we also see Sasse’s theme of creation being ineffable, beyond human imagination, and thus not described literally by Genesis 1–2. It is also perhaps ironic that, directly after saying that man cannot explain what the clod of dirt was, Sasse then gives a suggestion for what it was, a suggestion which accords very well with his scientific view of the world.

While Sasse continually rejects what he calls “a false biblicism,” parallel to the “hopeless fight against the Copernican view of the world” mainly practiced in English-speaking Christendom, he also rejects popularized Darwinism, which presents itself as a replacement for religion.⁴⁵ Instead of godless evolution, Sasse sees the theological meaning of evolutionary creation in the idea that man is bound to the rest of creation, and God’s dealings with man extend to all creation.⁴⁶ “It is biblical doctrine,” he says, “not theological or philosophical speculation, that

⁴² Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 55–59.

⁴³ “Die heilige Urgeschichte wird zu einem Kinostück, das in rasender Eile abgespielt wird.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 58; see also 108.

⁴⁴ “Diese Kapitel, die von Dingen reden, die jenseits aller Erfahrung und aller menschlichen Vorstellungsmöglichkeit liegen, enthalten Redeweisen und Bilder, die wir nicht zu erklären vermögen. Wir zweifeln nicht daran, daß Gott den Menschen aus einem ‘Erdenkloß’ gemacht habe, aber wir vermögen nicht zu sagen, was dieser Erdenkloß war. Sollte es etwa ein lebendiges Wesen gewesen sein, aus der Tierwelt hervorgegangen, das Gott dazu prädestiniert hatte, Mensch, Träger seines eigenen Ebenbildes, zu werden?” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 59.

⁴⁵ “ein falscher Biblizismus . . . hoffnungslosen Kampf gegen das Kopernikanische Weltbild.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 59.

⁴⁶ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 60–62.

creation participates in the fall and redemption of man.”⁴⁷ With this quotation, Sasse moves himself into the shadow of the evolutionary theology of Teilhard de Chardin, whose work he knew.⁴⁸ For Teilhard, salvation is universal, including not only human beings but the entire cosmos.⁴⁹

The Fall of Man

With this openness to an evolutionary account of human origins, it makes sense that Sasse would next turn to the fall of man in section C of “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift.”⁵⁰ Sasse, who valued the Lutheran Confessions so highly, never taught universal salvation and always affirmed the reality of original sin. With original sin, the doctrine of the image of God hangs together. For Sasse, whatever else the image of God may be, it includes linguistic ability in general and the ability to understand the word of God specifically. “We hear in Scripture that God made man according to His image. This includes the fact that He spoke with him and was understood by him.”⁵¹ Just as being addressed by God and understanding him constitutes part of the image of God, so also the original sin involved refusing to hear and believe God. “The image of God has been lost,” he says. “It was lost when the man no longer wanted to consider the Word of God as true, when he let it be torn out of his heart by an uncanny, anti-divine power and granted hearing to that other voice, which promised him: ‘You shall be like God’ [Gen 3:5].”⁵² Yet the details of the fall into sin are ineffable, beyond human comprehension, and thus, according to Sasse, Genesis 3 must be taken figuratively.⁵³

Sasse admits that the fall into sin is “one of the most difficult questions of theology,”⁵⁴ that is, it is difficult when one accepts an old creation and the

⁴⁷ “Es ist biblische Lehre, nicht theologische oder philosophische Spekulation, daß die Kreatur am Fall und an der Erlösung des Menschen Anteil hat.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 62.

⁴⁸ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 67.

⁴⁹ J. Matthew Ashley, “Original Sin, Biblical Hermeneutics, and the Science of Evolution,” in *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: 1700–Present*, ed. Jitse M. van der Meer and Scott Mandelbrote, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 420–423.

⁵⁰ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 63–71.

⁵¹ “Wir hören in der Schrift, daß Gott den menschen zu seinem Bilde gemacht hat. Das schließt die Tatsache ein, daß er mit ihm redete und von ihm verstanden wurde.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 63.

⁵² “Das Ebenbild Gottes ist verloren gegangen. Es ging verloren, als der mensch nicht mehr das Wort Gottes wahrhaben wollte, als er sich durch eine unheimliche widergöttliche Macht aus dem Herzen reißen ließ und jener anderen Stimme Gehör schenkte, die ihm verhieß: ‘Ihr werdet sein wie Gott.’” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 63.

⁵³ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 64.

⁵⁴ “eine der schwierigsten Fragen der Theologie.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 63.

evolutionary origins of humanity. It is difficult for Sasse's theology of creation because he admits that St. Paul and the Lord Jesus view Adam not just as a collective representative of "humanity" but also as an individual in history (see Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:21ff, 45ff; Matt 19:4ff; Mark 10:6–7).⁵⁵ "If the first Adam is not historical, then the historicity also of Christ as the Redeemer becomes doubtful."⁵⁶ Yet, according to Sasse, the events of Genesis 1–3 cannot be dated historically, since they are ineffable, outside the experience of any human. "But this changes nothing about the fact that the fall happened."⁵⁷

Next, Sasse writes that "Adam" also means "man" per se, every individual human being. "At the same time it must be seen that 'Adam' is not only an individual, but man per se. In each human being his history is repeated."⁵⁸ Here it is not entirely clear whether this is Sasse's understanding of the historical Adam—i.e., a universalized story, that what happened in the fall with Adam and Eve describes what happens to every human⁵⁹—or whether this is a digression, adding a teaching aside from the fact that there was an Adam and fall somewhere in history. It is worded as a digression, but it is placed right after the assertion that the events of Genesis 1–3 cannot be historically dated. Yet without a real fall from a state of integrity to sin, Sasse rightly notes that Christian theology would become either Manichaeism (teaching a natural, original fallenness) or Pelagian (teaching man as a continuously developing product of nature). The end result would be universal salvation, which the New Testament and the Athanasian Creed so clearly reject.⁶⁰ So there has to have been a real fall. Sasse writes: "Thus the Gospel of the Church and the entire Christian faith stands and falls with the doctrine of sin as a condition of natural man. Sin would not be sin, not guilt, if the fall of man, the fall of humanity as a whole and of every individual, were not a reality."⁶¹

It is indeed one of the most difficult questions in theology for those who affirm human evolution. Sasse explicitly rejects two contemporary reformulations of the

⁵⁵ Sasse, "Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift," 63–64.

⁵⁶ "Wenn der erste Adam nicht historisch ist, dann wird auch die Historizität Christi als des Erlösers zweifelhaft." Sasse, "Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift," 64.

⁵⁷ "Aber das ändert nichts an der Tatsache, daß der Fall sich ereignet hat." Sasse, "Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift," 64.

⁵⁸ "Zugleich muß gesehen werden, daß 'Adam' nicht nur ein Individuum ist, sondern der Mensch schlechthin. In jedem menschen wiederholt sich seine Geschichte." Sasse, "Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift," 64.

⁵⁹ For the consequences to theology of universalizing the event of the fall into sin, see Ashley, "Original Sin, Biblical Hermeneutics, and the Science of Evolution."

⁶⁰ Sasse, "Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift," 66–67.

⁶¹ "So steht und fällt das Evangelium der Kirche und der ganze christliche Glaube mit der Lehre von der Sünde als einem Zustand des natürlichen Menschen. Sünde wäre nicht Sünde, nicht Schuld, wenn der Fall des Menschen, der Fall der Menschheit als ganzer und jedes Einzelnen, keine Wirklichkeit wäre." Sasse, "Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift," 66.

doctrine of original sin. Regin Prenter's existential reformulation fails because it does not affirm the reality of the transmission of Adam's sin.⁶² Roman Catholic attempts, such as that of Teilhard de Chardin, in essence remove original sin and replace it with the idea that God created the world in a disordered state and brings it gradually to ever greater perfection—a twentieth-century version of Pelagianism.⁶³ Rejecting these reformulations, Sasse concludes:

Thus we will have to consider the fall as a historical event—although here we do not want to dispute about words like “historical” and “prehistoric.” What we mean is an event that happened here on our earth—shifting the fall to a preexistence is a myth that Origen invented—and at the beginning of human history. For at some point indeed the human sin must have had its beginning.⁶⁴

Also, the fall cannot be something that happened in multiple places, as would be necessary under normal evolutionary circumstances. Sasse explains: “The idea that the fall took place at the same time in multiple places—as one would have to assume if the creation of man is imagined as a sudden emergence of a new species of human beings at different places of the earth—would take away from the fall its character as a personal sin.”⁶⁵

This is as much as Sasse affirms about the fall into sin. The image of God includes the ability to hear God's speaking to man. The loss of the image includes refusing to believe him. Roman Catholic and existential Protestant ways of reformulating the doctrine of the fall into sin with the acceptance of evolution lead to Manichaeism or Pelagianism, and ultimately universalism, all of which Sasse rejects on the basis of the New Testament and the church's confession. Therefore Sasse affirms a historical fall into sin of the first humans, whenever that might have happened.

⁶² Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 66, 69–70.

⁶³ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 67–68.

⁶⁴ “So werden wir den Fall als ein historisches Ereignis zu betrachten haben—wobei wir über Wörter wie ‘historisch’ und ‘praehistorisch’ hier nicht streiten wollen. Was wir meinen, ist ein Ereignis, das hier auf unserer Erde—die Verlegung des Falles in eine Präexistenz ist ein Mythos, den Origines erdacht hat—und am Anfang der menschlichen Geschichte stattgefunden hat. Denn einmal muß ja die menschliche Sünde ihren Anfang genommen haben.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 70.

⁶⁵ “Daß der Fall gleichzeitig an mehreren Stellen stattgefunden haben sollte, wie man annehmen müßte, wenn man die Schöpfung des Menschen als ein plötzliches Auftreten einer neuen Art von menschlichen Lebewesen an verschiedenen Stellen der Erde sich vorstellt, würde dem Fall seinen Charakter als einer persönlichen Sünde nehmen.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 70.

Adam and Christ

In section D of “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” Sasse describes the theological connection between “Adam” and Christ, using a comparison with ancient world religions. On the basis of this comparison, he sees that the creation of the first Adam and the first promise of the gospel in Genesis 3:15 are central to the Bible’s message.⁶⁶

The word of the divine judgment upon the “serpent” and upon fallen man is accompanied by the first Gospel in Gen. 3:15, in which the Church at all times has seen the first promise of the coming Redeemer, thus of the incarnation of the Son of God. This is the connection between the first and the second Adam, whom Paul so clearly recognized. We must acknowledge Him as the essential content of the biblical truth.⁶⁷

The Church’s Doctrine of Creation

Section E is entitled “The Dogma of Creation in the Confession of the Church.”⁶⁸ In this section, Sasse argues that until the Galileo case (1633) and various confessions of Reformed churches, no Christians made a dogma out of the definition of the creation days. Therefore, he argues, Lutherans should not do this. His definition of a confession explains why the early Christian dogma of creation was brief:

Not every sentence of Scripture is elevated to the level of an article of faith, but this does not mean that the truth of Scripture may be doubted. The confession of faith does not say everything that the Church believes; in short sentences it pronounces the central truths of the divine revelation in Holy Scripture, whose denial would destroy the Gospel and, thereby, the Church.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 73–83.

⁶⁷ “Das Wort des göttlichen Gerichts über die ‘Schlange’ und über den gefallen Menschen ist begleitet von dem Protevangelium Gen. 3,15, in dem die Kirche zu allen Zeiten die erste Verheißung des kommenden Erlösers, also der Menschwerdung des Sohnes Gottes gesehen hat. Das ist der Zusammenhang zwischen dem ersten und dem zweiten Adam, den Paulus so klar erkannt hat. Wir müssen ihn als wesentlichen Inhalt der biblischen Wahrheit anerkennen.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 82.

⁶⁸ “Das Dogma von der Schöpfung im Bekenntnis der Kirche.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 85–89.

⁶⁹ “Nicht jeder Satz der Schrift wird zum Glaubensartikel erhoben, aber das bedeutet nicht, daß man die Wahrheit der Schrift bezweifeln darf. Das Glaubensbekenntnis sagt nicht alles, was die Kirche glaubt, es spricht in kurzen Sätzen die zentralen Wahrheiten der göttlichen Offenbarung in der heiligen Schrift aus, deren Leugnung das Evangelium und damit die Kirche zerstören würde.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 86–87.

By this definition, the understanding of the six literal days of creation could not possibly be a dogma. This is his basic argument here. If denying a scriptural truth would destroy the gospel, then the church should make it a confession. But with regard to the creation days, Sasse sees it as impossible to understand these as ordinary, twenty-four-hour days. He raises a series of rhetorical questions meant to undermine the possibility that these days could have been the same length of time as the days that we experience.

For what is the “normal day”? It is the period of time in which the earth revolves around itself once, or, in the view of the older era, the period of time which the sun requires to move around the earth. When would this movement of the sun or of the earth have begun? . . . When did the earth begin to rotate? Genesis 1 assumes that the earth is older than the sun and stars, that it is the firm middle point of the universe. What can a day with morning and evening be without this movement, without that which we call the rising and setting of the sun?⁷⁰

In Sasse’s view, it is *simply impossible* for the first three days, at least (before the creation of sun and moon), to be ordinary twenty-four-hour days. He can think of no way that there could be normal-length days with morning and evening, without the movement of the earth, and without the sun. Therefore Sasse wants the definition of the creation days to remain an open question, as he says it was in the early church and the middle ages.⁷¹ Only the narrow-minded Tridentine Roman Catholic Church made an issue out of a picture of the world in the trial of Galileo, and Reformed churches in the latter half of the sixteenth century did the same. For Sasse, it is extremely significant that the Book of Concord did not do this.⁷² Sasse’s pathos about this topic and his ire against conservatives on this topic are especially evident as he speaks about American Lutherans.

For the author of Genesis 1 there is an absolute time—a day is a day in the whole universe. “I, too, am an old 24-hour man,” says an older pastor in America. Sure, a farmer or a pastor in the Midwest can afford to say that. But would they expect this also of their children, of their students, and their

⁷⁰ “Denn was ist der ‘gewöhnliche Tag?’ Er ist der Zeitraum, innerhalb dessen sich die Erde einmal um sich selber dreht, oder in der Anschauungsweise der älteren Zeit, der Zeitraum, den die Sonne braucht, um sich um die Erde zu bewegen. Wann hätte diese Bewegung der Sonne oder der Erde angefangen? . . . Wann hat die Erde angefangen, zu rotieren? Gen. 1 setzt voraus, daß die Erde älter ist als die Sonne und die Sterne, der feste Mittelpunkt des Universums. Was kann ein Tag mit Morgen und Abend sein ohne diese Bewegung, ohne das, was wir den Aufgang und der Untergang der Sonnen nennen?” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 88.

⁷¹ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 89.

⁷² Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 89.

professors, this “orthodoxy” which basically is not a right belief at all, but only thoughtlessness?⁷³

On this topic, Sasse lashes out at any who with simple faith would simply accept the literal reading of Genesis 1. He not only pleads for openness toward his evolutionary ideas, he mocks Midwestern American Lutherans who see it differently. What Sasse feared was that this conservative American Lutheran view of creation would prevail and become dogma, binding consciences by adding the shibboleth of a particular worldview. “The Lutheran Church did not dogmatize Luther’s view of the creation days. Only later, under the influence of American fundamentalism, does the creation day of 24 hours threaten to become, among some Lutherans, an article on which the Church stands and falls.”⁷⁴

Age of the World

The last section of the chapter on the primeval revelation is section F, named “*Supputatio Annorum Mundi*” (“Calculation of the Years of the World”), the title of a chronology by Luther in which he dated the beginning of the world at 4004 BC.⁷⁵ In this section, Sasse criticizes Luther’s chronology, stating that the attempt to figure out the age of the world from biblical chronology is impossible. He posits an evolutionary development of mankind, claiming that at some point in his evolution, God first spoke to man. This was the beginning of humanity in a theological sense. Finally, in this section he postulates what prehistoric religion may have been like.⁷⁶

Just as the length of the creation days was never a dogma in the early church and Middle Ages, according to Sasse, so also, the age of the earth was never a dogma. Due to the differing chronologies of the Masoretic Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Septuagint Greek translation, such a firm and certain date was impossible.⁷⁷ According to Sasse, ancient genealogies, including those in the Bible, were never

⁷³ “Für den Verfasser von Gen. 1 gibt es eine absolute Zeit, ein Tag ist ein Tag im ganzen Universum. ‘Ich bin auch so ein alter Vierundzwanzigstünder,’ sagt ein älterer Pastor in Amerika. Gewiß, das kann sich ein Farmer oder Pastor im Mittleren Westen leisten. Aber würden sie auch von ihren Kindern, von ihren Studenten und ihren Hochschullehrern diese ‘Orthodoxie’ erwarten, die im Grunde ja gar keine Rechtgläubigkeit, sondern nur Gedankenlosigkeit ist?” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 88.

⁷⁴ “Die lutherische Kirche hat Luthers Anschauung von den Schöpfungstagen nicht dogmatisiert. Erst unter dem Einfluß des amerikanischen Fundamentalismus droht der Schöpfungstag von 24 Stunden bei manchen Lutheranern ein *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* zu werden.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 89.

⁷⁵ Martin Luther, *Supputatio Annorum Mundi* (1541/1545), in Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), vol. 53:22–184.

⁷⁶ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 99–111.

⁷⁷ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 103.

meant to be understood literally. Therefore the dates of the biblical genealogies are not really historical. Genealogies are rather a literary genre that allowed authorial freedom.⁷⁸ This then allows Sasse the possibility of accepting modern views of the world.

Here Sasse not only argues that one may accept an evolutionary view of the world, but that one must. Just as the church had to accept the truth of the Copernican, heliocentric solar system, so also it must accept what prehistoric research and paleontology sets forth as fact.

One must have this cosmos with its expanse in millions of light-years before his eyes in order rightly to evaluate the expanse of the history of humanity. Just as the Church and her theology must accept the *facts* divulged by astronomy and astrophysics, so it stands also with the facts placed before us by prehistoric research and paleontology. We are speaking about facts, not about theories and hypotheses, which have been proposed to explain these facts.⁷⁹

Here it is clear that Sasse saw a necessary connection between the astronomical distance of stars as measured in light-years and the age of the created universe, as if one could calculate the latest possible date of creation by finding the distance to the most distant visible star, as if God could not create stars with their light already reaching us on earth, or as if the laws of physics in the beginning of creation must be the same as we now experience in the world. Also it is clear here that Sasse accepted the findings of these disciplines, including paleontology, as including facts that necessitate a figurative reading of Genesis 1–3. What controls his exegesis of Scripture in this case lies outside of Scripture.

So how does the creation of man in the image of God fit with the evolutionary idea of constantly developing organisms that go from less to more complex through survival of the fittest? How is it possible for man to develop by evolution gradually from lower life forms, and yet at some point *man* is present as created by God? In a section that seems to be at odds with his previous section on the fall into sin, Sasse explains his view of evolutionary creation. He says that while the oldest written

⁷⁸ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 104–105.

⁷⁹ “Man muß diesen Kosmos mit seiner Ausdehnung in Millionen von Lichtjahren vor Augen haben, um die Ausdehnung der Geschichte der Menschheit recht zu würdigen. Wie die Kirche und ihre Theologie die von der Astronomie und Astrophysik enthüllten *Tatsachen* annehmen muß, so steht es auch mit den Tatsachen, vor die uns die Vorgeschichtsforschung und die Paläontologie stellen. Wir reden von den Tatsachen, nicht von Theorien und Hypothesen, die zur Erklärung dieser Tatsachen aufgestellt worden sind.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 106, emphasis original. On this passage, see Wachler, *Die Inspiration und Irrtumslosigkeit der Schrift*, 92.

records go back to about 3000 BC, humanity actually appeared on earth hundreds of millennia prior to this.⁸⁰

Whatever the natural-scientific anthropology may consider to be the beginning of man in distinction from the pre-human creation, such as inventing and using tools (*homo faber*) or mastering fire, man in the theological sense begins with the address of God, who calls him into being as His image and as His representative in the mastery of the earthly creation.⁸¹

For Sasse, this is the truth that lies behind the figurative speech of Genesis 1–2. Interesting here is that Sasse really cannot point to any created, biological difference between man in the theological sense and pre-human creatures. According to Sasse’s model, *homo sapiens* could have existed for thousands of years before God spoke to them the first time. This, then, raises unanswerable hypothetical questions about the salvation-theological status of such human beings. Also, in this place, apparently the linguistic aspect of humanity has become so central to Sasse’s view of the image of God that without linguistic ability it is difficult to conceive of humanity being in the image of God. In any case, it is clear that none of this can be derived from Genesis 1–3. Sasse has set aside the literal meaning of the creation account and substituted an evolutionary myth for it. The biblical act of creation has been changed to the evolutionary act of transformation.⁸²

The next theological question arising from this account of human origins is this: What should be thought about the religion of prehistoric humanity during the hundreds of thousands of years before the revelation that is recorded in Scripture? Sasse gives his opinion: “The 4000 or 5000 years of the old ‘Calculation of the Years of the Earth’ have expanded to several hundred thousand years. In these unimaginably long periods of time, did God not only deal with men in judgment and grace, but also speak? We must assume this.”⁸³ With a view of history that was much shorter, Luther and Augustine, too, tried to account for how the “first Gospel” (Gen 3:15) would have been preserved and what the religion of the oldest period of

⁸⁰ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 107.

⁸¹ “Was immer die naturwissenschaftliche Anthropologie als den Anfang des Menschen im Unterschied von der vormenschlichen Kreatur betrachten mag, wie die Erfindung und den Gebrauch von Werkzeugen (*homo faber*) oder die Beherrschung des Feuers, der Mensch im theologischen Sinne beginnt mit dem Anruf Gottes, der ihn ins Dasein ruft als sein Ebenbild und als seinen Stellvertreter in der Beherrschung der irdischen Kreatur.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 108.

⁸² Cf. Wachler, *Die Inspiration und Irrtumslosigkeit der Schrift*, 116–118.

⁸³ “Die 4000 oder 5000 Jahre der älteren ‘supputatio annorum mundi’ haben sich erweitert zu einigen hunderttausenden von Jahren. Hat Gott in diesen unvorstellbar langen Zeiträumen mit den Menschen nicht nur gehandelt in Gericht und Gnade, sondern auch geredet? Wir müssen das annehmen.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 108.

humanity would have been. Luther posits an oral tradition from father to son, while Augustine posits revelations from angels.⁸⁴ Sasse opines: “The only thing that we have to say is this: mankind never was completely without the Word of God in Law and Gospel; even in that past that to us is dark, God spoke to men.”⁸⁵ As proof, Sasse points to how God is reported to have spoken to mankind both before and after the flood⁸⁶ (which account, however, Sasse does not consider historically reliable). On the basis of non-Israelite believers in the Old Testament, Sasse suggests: “But if all of that happened at the time of the biblical history of salvation, then we may assume that it also happened before that time. There may have always been priests like Melchizedek. Also there may not have been a lack of prophets, even if nothing of the word that was commissioned to them has been preserved.”⁸⁷ Finally, “The conflict between faith and unbelief, the conflict of faith in the one true God against idolatry was the theme also of the long millennia of human history that lie in the darkness of prehistory.”⁸⁸

Thus for Sasse, Scripture does not actually give us details on creation, only a few theological truths. The details of creation must instead be learned from prehistoric research, paleontology, astronomy, and geology. What Genesis 1–3 teaches is that God is the Creator, the creation is not eternal, there was a real fall into sin, and there was a first promise of the Savior. But, according to Sasse, Genesis 1–3 is not to be taken literally regarding nature. This is impossible, and not actually what God intended, says Sasse. Yet throughout this chapter on primeval history, Sasse is careful not to call Genesis 1–3 “myth,” nor does he ever say that Scripture has errors. Genesis 1–3 was inspired by the Holy Spirit and is God’s word, just as the rest of Scripture is. But by the use of the “law of parallels” (parallel narratives that cannot be harmonized) and by definition and application of various genres (e.g., non-historical genealogy), Sasse is able to escape the literal sense of the text. The “law of parallels” enables him to treat Genesis 1–3 as myth (even if he does not call it

⁸⁴ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 109.

⁸⁵ “Das einzige, was wir zu sagen haben, ist dies, daß die Menschheit niemals ganz ohne das Wort Gottes in Gesetz und Evangelium war, daß Gott auch in jener uns dunklen Vergangenheit zu Menschen geredet hat.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 109.

⁸⁶ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 109.

⁸⁷ “Geschah das alles aber zur Zeit der biblischen Heilsgeschichte, dann dürfen wir annehmen, daß es auch schon vor dieser Zeit geschah. Priester wie Melchisedek mag es zu allen Zeiten gegeben haben. Auch an Propheten mag es nicht gefehlt haben, auch, wenn nichts von dem Wort erhalten ist, das ihnen aufgetragen war.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 110.

⁸⁸ “Der Kampf zwischen Glauben und Unglauben, der Kampf des Glaubens an den einen rechten Gott und gegen den Götzendienst war das Thema auch der langen, im Dunkel der Vorgeschichte liegenden Jahrtausende menschlicher Geschichte.” Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 111. This same idea of prehistoric religion was taught previously by a man Sasse revered: Augustinus Bea, “Praehistoria et exegesis libri Genesis,” *Verbum Domini* 17–18 (1937–1938): 14–20, 344–347, 360–366.

“myth”), and the definition of literary genres likewise enables him to remove sections of Scripture from being considered historically reliable.⁸⁹ The identification of non-literal genres is aided by Sasse’s common use of arguments from the history of the church and the history of religions.⁹⁰ While doing all of this, he can still claim to uphold the plenary inerrancy of Scripture and its divine inspiration. Moreover, by claiming that creation is ineffable and outside the grasp of the human mind, he is able to regard any biblical details of creation as figurative, just by definition.⁹¹

What is especially evident is that although Sasse has maintained Scripture’s inerrancy and inspiration, he has sacrificed its authority. For Sasse, the Lutheran Church’s doctrine of sin and grace is regarded as certain, and from here he argues back to the need for a real fall into sin. But for Jesus (Matt 19:8), St. Paul, Augustine, and Luther, the historical fact of the fall of Adam and Eve as recorded in Genesis 3 was certain, and was the basis for their teaching on original sin and grace. Thus, if the doctrine of original sin needs to be reformulated, on what basis can Sasse maintain that the *Lutheran* doctrine of original sin needs to be maintained? This he tries to do by a history-of-religions comparison of Christianity with other ancient religions. He finds the specific characteristic of Christianity to be the forgiveness of sins.⁹² Apparently this uniqueness of Christianity in the history of religions suffices as proof, since Genesis 3 can no longer be taken literally. But does uniqueness entail truth?

Chapter 6 of Sasse’s *Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift* reads as a finished product, ready for publication. Nevertheless, significant internal contradictions remain within it. Regarding the fall into sin in section C, Sasse rejects the normal evolutionary belief that mankind developed as *homo sapiens* at various places around the same time. Sasse claims there must have been one original man who fell. Yet in section F, Sasse accepts the evolutionary theory of the development of mankind and states that man was really man in the theological sense when God began speaking to him. Here there is no room for a creationally, biologically distinct human creature, who is different from his pre-human ancestors. Only God’s address makes a difference between man and beast. There is apparently no created, physical, biological difference. Sasse also remains curiously silent about major theological problems inherent in evolutionary creation. For example, how is the evolutionary

⁸⁹ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 46, 55–59, 108, 102–103; cf. Hermann Sasse, “Defining of the Basic Issues Arising Out of Genesis Chapters 1–3” (unpublished manuscript, August 30, 1967), 5–6, 11–12.

⁹⁰ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 50, 52–54, 85–89, 103, 108.

⁹¹ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 59, 64; cf. Sasse, “Defining of the Basic Issues Arising Out of Genesis Chapters 1–3,” 14–15.

⁹² Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 64–66.

process before the appearance of *homo sapiens* to be reconciled with Romans 6:23: “The wages of sin is death”?⁹³

Accommodation to Error

Accommodation is a technique Sasse used to avoid a literal reading of Genesis 1–3. This is stated when he claims axiomatically that these chapters are not cosmology but rather that they use the picture of the world common to ancient people.⁹⁴ This is the strategy he used to adjust exegesis to fit contemporary biblical studies and science. This is often where he was aiming when he used the incarnational analogy for Scripture, that it is not just fully divine but also fully human. While the two-natures analogy in itself may be helpful in highlighting how God spoke through real human beings in real human language, Sasse sometimes used the analogy to suggest certain statements of Scripture might be inaccurate.⁹⁵

What is accommodation, really? Accommodation was a technique used in the seventeenth century to adjust scriptural interpretation to fit with contemporary philosophy and science without denying its inspiration and divine authorship.⁹⁶ Accommodation, or condescension, has been used since the early eras of the church to explain God’s self-revelation (e.g., in anthropomorphisms and by use of human language).⁹⁷ Since the seventeenth century, however, the Socinians popularized a

⁹³ All Scripture quotations are from the ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁹⁴ Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 46–47, 104–105; cf. Sasse, “Defining of the Basic Issues Arising Out of Genesis Chapters 1–3,” 11, 13–15. Others have noticed places where Sasse used accommodation, without connecting his use to the long history of accommodation within Christian history, especially since the Enlightenment. Volkmar, “Volles Gotteswort und volles Menschenwort,” 60–61; Kloha, “Hermann Sasse Confesses the Doctrine *De Scriptura Sacra*,” 358–359, 363–364, 368, 395, 416–417.

⁹⁵ Wachler sees Sasse as using the two-natures analogy to affirm errors in Scripture, but he does not notice how this theme in Sasse’s later writings is used not to assert “errors” but rather accommodation to common, outdated views of the world and erroneous opinions (though Sasse would not call them erroneous). Wachler, *Die Inspiration und Irrtumslosigkeit der Schrift*, 87–93. Regarding modern Evangelical uses of the incarnational analogy to assert errancy or accommodation to errors, see Hoon J. Lee, “Accommodation: Orthodox, Socinian, and Contemporary,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 75, no. 2 (2013): 340–341. For a better use of the two-natures analogy than how Sasse uses it, see Wachler, *Die Inspiration und Irrtumslosigkeit der Schrift*, 88–91.

⁹⁶ For example, Dutch center-Cartesianist Balthasar Bekker’s *De Betoverde Weereld* (1691) [*The World Bewitched* (1695)] used the doctrine of accommodation to reject the real existence of angels and demons, claiming that it was never God’s intention to teach the reality of such angelic beings. Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology*, 128–131.

⁹⁷ Johann Gerhard made extensive use of the idea (in the narrow sense). Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of God and on the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, trans.

different kind of accommodation theory, in which God's scriptural word was accommodated not just to the human point of view and human language but even to the supposedly erroneous ideas of its original audience. This then allowed its practitioners to discard any biblical statements or teachings that they found difficult to accept.⁹⁸ In the words of Christoph Wittich (1625–1687), who helped to popularize the idea in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, “We can now add passages of Scripture in which the resting of the earth [and] the motion of the sun around the earth is ascribed, and thus also by these examples can prove that Scripture speaks according to the opinion of the common people, not always according to the accurate truth of reality.”⁹⁹ Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791), too, made an extensive use of “accommodation” to argue that certain doctrines within Scripture were never intended to confirm the teachings which they seem to affirm, such as angels, demons, the bosom of Abraham, and Christ's second coming. This is where Semler's accommodation theory differs from Rudolf Bultmann's (1884–1976) demythologization program. For Semler, the New Testament writers did not intend to teach outmoded, primitive conceptions, but deliberately accommodated their speech to what the audience could grasp. For Bultmann, on the other hand, the biblical authors themselves held these outmoded, primitive ideas.¹⁰⁰ In this respect, Sasse's use of accommodation is closer to Bultmann's than to Semler's. For Sasse, the biblical authors' worldview was outdated and is no longer tenable.

While inspiration and inerrancy may be compatible with a broad use of accommodation, biblical authority is not, because accommodation allows the interpreter to read as figurative any and every challenging passage of Scripture. And if there is no challenge as Scripture confronts contemporary worldviews, then it has no authority.¹⁰¹ There are several dangers that arise from the misuse of accommodation. Besides the fact that in the Enlightenment it was claimed that God

Richard J. Dinda, *Theological Commonplaces, Exegesis II–III* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 115–116, 125–128, 143–144, 150–151, 153, 230.

⁹⁸ Lee, “Accommodation”; Vern S. Poythress, “Rethinking Accommodation in Revelation,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 76, no. 1 (2014): 143–156.

⁹⁹ “Possemus nunc subjungere locos Scripturae, in quibus Terrae quies Soli motus circa terram adscribitur atque ita etiam his exemplis probare, quod Scriptura loquatur ad vulgi opinionem, non semper ad accuratam rei veritatem.” Christoph Wittich, *Dissertationes duae, quarum prior de S. Scripturae in rebus philosophicis abusu examinatur* (Amsterdam: Ludovicus Elzevirius, 1653), 62; Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology*, 124–125.

¹⁰⁰ Boris Paschke, “The Contribution of Johann Salomo Semler to the Historical Criticism of the New Testament,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 80, no. 1–2 (2016): 121–124.

¹⁰¹ Another way of looking at it is to say that Sasse never fully accepted biblical inerrancy. Accommodation for him meant that God's revelation condescended not just to human perception but also to outdated and erroneous views of the world, things that he could not accept as true, but ridiculed as naive. Nevertheless, after 1951 Sasse avoided the words “erroneous” and “error.”

accommodated his biblical revelation to human error and superstition, it is possible to claim false transcendence and false immanence, and to set up reason or observation of the world (science) as the arbiter that determines what biblical content is or is not accommodated.¹⁰²

Sasse seems to have taken a step away from the higher criticism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but he always refused to return to the doctrine of Scripture taught by Lutheran Orthodoxy. Instead he stayed with the accommodation theory as was being taught in the early Enlightenment. By turning to the modern evolutionary theory of origins as his standard for interpreting Genesis 1–3, it seems that Sasse has found his superior viewpoint outside of Scripture, according to which Scripture must be interpreted.¹⁰³ Sasse's view of inerrancy does not actually function to exclude the allegorization or mythologizing of historical facts. If Genesis 1–3 is myth, accommodated to the erroneous worldview of the ancient Near East, why could the same procedure not be applied to the real presence in the Lord's Supper or to the resurrection of Christ? Whatever modern man finds impossible to believe—whether it is physical resurrection, the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Holy Supper, or a young earth—Sasse's kind of "inerrancy" would allow the biblical assertion of fact to be read as myth, a truth spoken in the language and according to the worldview of the ancient world, which modern man no longer shares, and cannot share. Here "inerrancy" no longer functions as a safeguard for dogma.

What should a Christian think about accommodation? We readily confess that Scripture is accommodated to human speech and thought. Moreover, God revealed himself using anthropomorphisms. Moreover, many details of the world in Scripture are stated from the standpoint of human observation (such as the standing still of the sun in Joshua 10, or the "firmament" in Gen 1:6). But God did not accommodate his word to human errors, superstitions, or *outdated* views of the world or of anything else. Scripture instead *corrects* human errors in viewing not just God but also the world, his created work.

It is ironic that Sasse so often claimed to be blazing a new trail regarding the doctrine of Holy Scripture.¹⁰⁴ Yet his hermeneutics are quite close to those of Semler and other Enlightenment theologians. Also, progressive Evangelical scholarship has used the exact same tools and made the same moves as Sasse did in order to make room for the acceptance of an old creation and evolution. Jack Rogers and Donald

¹⁰² Instead of this view of accommodation, Poythress helpfully observes: "God's speech is always coherent with the contexts that he himself specifies by his speech governing the universe (Heb. 1:3). That is the real meaning of accommodation." Poythress, "Rethinking Accommodation in Revelation," 155.

¹⁰³ Cf. Poythress, 154.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Hopf, "Hermann Sasse und sein Ringen."

McKim's 1979 book *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* proposed a view of inspiration in which God accommodated his revelation not just to human language, thought, and perceptions, but also to human limitations and errors, especially concerning history and science. Thus for them, as for Sasse, the sphere of biblical truth is restricted to matters of salvation, not to matters of history and science. More recently, Peter Enns, like Sasse, narrows the definition of "error" in order to affirm inerrancy while still asserting that the biblical picture of the world was mythological and not really accurate. That is, Sasse adopted what many progressive Evangelicals now hold: that Scripture is inspired and inerrant, but Genesis 1–3 is figurative, not really accurate on the details of creation.¹⁰⁵

Questions for Sasse

In his efforts to reject the classic Christian and Orthodox Lutheran doctrine of Scripture's inspiration, Sasse sometimes claimed that the Book of Concord did not give a doctrine of inspiration, and therefore we should leave the question open and not make it church-divisive.¹⁰⁶ Sometimes Sasse insisted that Lutherans needed a new doctrine on Holy Scripture, or that the lack of a full doctrine of Scripture in the Book of Concord does not mean that this doctrine is unnecessary.¹⁰⁷ And elsewhere he laments that the churches of the Reformation forgot the "dogma" of the inspiration of Scripture.¹⁰⁸ These conflicting statements on the doctrine of inspiration indicate that, despite all his beneficial contributions to confessional Lutherans, when it came to the doctrine of Scripture, Sasse was trying to find, but never succeeded in finding, a consistent middle position between the Lutheran Orthodox view of Scripture and modern critical exegesis. Despite the high esteem which many Lutherans have for Sasse on the doctrine of Holy Scripture, there are some insuperable problems and contradictions which have been made clear above. I close now with a few questions that arise from Sasse's understanding of Genesis 1–3.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Ashley, "Original Sin, Biblical Hermeneutics, and the Science of Evolution," 407–419; Jack Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979); Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say about Human Origins* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021); Kathryn Applegate and J. B. Stump, eds., *How I Changed My Mind about Evolution: Evangelicals Reflect on Faith and Science* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2016); see the discussion in Mark Rogers, "Charles Hodge and the Doctrine of Accommodation," *Trinity Journal* 31, no. 2 (2010): 225–242.

¹⁰⁶ Hermann Sasse, "Zur Lage der lutherischen Freikirchen in Deutschland" (June 25, 1946), in Hopf, "Hermann Sasse und sein Ringen," 29–30.

¹⁰⁷ Letter 14 to Lutheran Pastors, in Hopf, "Hermann Sasse und sein Ringen," 14.

¹⁰⁸ Letter to Augustinus Bea (June 13, 1965), in Hopf, "Hermann Sasse und sein Ringen," 38.

For Sasse, no matter how historically and literally the text of Scripture may be worded, he axiomatically excludes it as a standard of truth for the way in which the world and humanity were created. His standard for truth is not *sola Scriptura* but astronomy and paleontology.¹⁰⁹ Is this not a magisterial use of reason and experience? Also, if differing biblical accounts, which cannot be harmonized, mean for Sasse that Genesis 1–2 cannot be accepted literally, why should the Gospels be accepted literally, of which we have not just two, but four accounts? Also, despite his claim that creation is ineffable and beyond human experience, Sasse describes how he thinks evolutionary creation really happened. If creation is ineffable and beyond human experience, how can he presume to describe it along the lines of evolution? Also, while Sasse refuses to harmonize apparently contradictory biblical narratives, he proceeds to harmonize the biblical accounts with his view of world history as derived from astronomy and paleontology. If the history of the world is also of God’s authorship, why not just leave the conflicting narratives—Scripture and the observations of the world—unharmonized? As a German confessional Lutheran put it:

The warning should very certainly be embraced, that we should not take an old, human view of the world and read it into the Bible, and put it to use against researched facts. However, one also may not take every new theory of the origins of the world, which basically is the pagan theory of development put forth by the Greek natural philosophers, and read it into the Bible—in contradiction to the facts testified by the Bible.¹¹⁰

Also, even if Genesis 1–3 were figurative, but the doctrines testified there are still true, a few important doctrines from Genesis 1–3 have been left out of Sasse’s account. Sasse’s acceptance of evolution discards the distinction between creation from nothing and the preservation of creation. In Sasse’s version, only the creation of primordial matter is from nothing. Everything else develops over the course of eons. But this contradicts what Genesis 1:31–2:2 reports about the completion of day six of creation—a categorical distinction between the creation and its preservation, something that the evolutionary theory forbids.¹¹¹ Also, Sasse lacks a discussion of the state of integrity of Adam and Eve before the fall. To try to maintain all that Scripture says about the state of integrity before sin and death

¹⁰⁹ E.g., Sasse, “Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift,” 48, 88, 106–107.

¹¹⁰ “Ganz gewiss ist die Warnung zu beherzigen, nicht ein altes menschliches Weltbild in die Bibel hineinzulesen und sich dann damit gegen erforschte Tatsachen zu stemmen. Aber man darf auch nicht jede neue Weltentstehungstheorie, die im Grunde die heidnische Entwicklungstheorie der griechischen Naturphilosophen ist, in die Bibel hineinlesen—im Widerspruch zu den von der Bibel bezeugten Tatsachen.” Wachler, *Die Inspiration und Irrtumslosigkeit der Schrift*, 117.

¹¹¹ Wachler, *Die Inspiration*, 117–118.

conflicts with and can never be allowed by the evolutionary theory. To try to hold to the rest of the evolutionary theory except for this point—is this not untenable according to Sasse’s assumptions? Will one not have either to return to the authority of the literal sense of Genesis 1–3 or surrender the state of integrity?¹¹²

Also, why can Sasse defend miracles and the virgin birth of Christ, which are scientifically impossible and have repeatedly been considered myth,¹¹³ but attack the literal meaning of Genesis 1–3, a six-day creation and a young earth, which to many people seem scientifically impossible and have repeatedly been considered myth? Can creation be considered a miracle? If so, why should science be competent to dictate to us against the literal sense of Genesis 1–3?¹¹⁴ Also, Sasse took the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Holy Supper seriously and concretely, despite appearances. Why could he then not have held to Genesis 1–3 as real, literal history, despite the fact that it appears to contradict certain findings of the natural sciences? That is, if the *verba Christi* in the Supper must be taken literally, why not Genesis 1–3? If he believes in the real presence on the basis of the words of Christ, why can he not believe also in a recent creation on the basis of the words of Christ? Any argument against the literal sense of Genesis 1–3 could be used by Zwinglians against the literal sense of the *verba* in the Supper. But Sasse will not allow this, and rightly so.

Sasse wrestled with the doctrine of Holy Scripture and the understanding of Genesis 1–3 until the end of his life. While he came to accept the inerrancy of Scripture, this did not really change the way he did his exegesis, and as has been shown, this exegesis undermined the authority of Scripture. With this in mind, it seems that both groups of interpreters have noted something true. The Missouri Synod line of interpretation has rightly seen that Sasse gave up talk of errors in Scripture, and the other, mainly German, line of interpretation has rightly seen that he did not really change his views or his approach to Scripture.

What remains to be said is that this approach to the Scriptures, despite Sasse’s intention, puts man’s reason and observations of the world in higher authority than the words of Scripture. Sasse will still remain a father of the church (similar, in my opinion, to St. Augustine, Martin Luther, Johann Gerhard, and C. F. W. Walther), yet he should not be considered an infallible father. He still has much to teach us on confessing Christ, on the Holy Supper, and a score of other topics. May we continue to have him as our teacher, even if we do not count him as our authority.

¹¹² Wachler, *Die Inspiration*, 119–120.

¹¹³ Hopf, “Hermann Sasse und sein Ringen,” 20.

¹¹⁴ Sasse says science is not competent to judge or rule out miracles. See above, n. 23.