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Mickey L Mattox



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Eve in early Reformation exegesis: the case of Iohannes Oecolampadius¹

MICKEY L. MATTOX

Marquette University, Milwaukee, USA

Iohannes Oecolampadius stood at the forefront of the Reformation in Basel. He not only worked tirelessly for the reform of the city's churches, but also authored pioneering evangelical works of theology and exegesis. The interpretation of Eve found in his late lectures on Genesis showcases both a new emphasis on Eve's goodness and original equality with Adam, as well as a parallel insistence on her subordination to her husband after the Fall. His conception of husband and wife as partners of equal dignity on the path toward salvation moves in the direction of companionate marriage, but it stops short of calling for women's equality in the public sphere.

KEYWORDS Oecolampadius, Genesis, Eve, Adam, the Fall, exegesis

In the late summer of 1531, Iohannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531) and his fellow reformers in Basel began a much-anticipated series of public lectures on the Bible, alternating weekly between Genesis and Matthew as required by the city's Reformation Ordinance of 1529.² After years of struggle to bring reform to Basel's churches, things at last seemed to be on track. Not long after the lectures began, however, their bright promise fell under lengthening shadows. In late October, the Baslers received the disheartening news of Ulrich Zwingli's death at the second battle of Kappel. Just a few weeks later, Oecolampadius himself fell ill, and in late November, surrounded

¹ The author wishes to thank Marquette University Press for permission to use here in revised form selections from the introduction to *Iohannes Oecolampadius: An Exposition of Genesis*, trans. M. L. Mattox (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2013). This work gives Latin and English on facing pages. Citations below are given with page numbers for the Latin / English divided by a forward slash, e.g., *Exposition*, 95/6.

² For the life and work of Oecolampadius, see Ernst Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk Johannes Oekolampads* (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger, 1939); *Briefe und Akten zum Leben Oekolampads*, ed. E. Staehelin, 2 vols (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger, 1927–34); T. Fudge, 'Icarus of Basel? Oecolampadius and the Early Swiss Reformation', *The Journal of Religious History* 21, no. 3 (1997): 268–84; E. L. Miller, 'Oecolampadius: Unsung Hero of the Basel Reformation', *Iliff Review* 39, no. 3 (1982): 5–25; G. Rupp, 'Johannes Oecolampadius: The Reformer as Scholar', in *Patterns of Reformation*, Part I, ed. Gordon Rupp (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 3–46. For the course of the early Reformation in Basel, see Amy Nelson Burnett, *Teaching the Reformation: Ministers and Their Message in Basel, 1529–1629* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

by admirers and loved ones, including his wife and children³, Basel's tireless reformer died, his work cut short.

In part because of his untimely death, Oecolampadius has traditionally been considered a less important reformer than, say, Martin Luther, Zwingli, or John Calvin. More recent studies, however, underscore his seminal contributions to early Reformed theology and exegesis.⁴ Researchers have drawn attention, for example, to his extensive work with the Greek Church Fathers and the role these studies played in his preaching, his theology of the Lord's Supper, and his exegesis of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament.⁵ The lectures on Genesis of 1531 reflect the piety and industry of a reformer who skilfully deployed the new learning of his day: reading Scripture in the original languages, and applying the insights gained through his intensive studies of the Fathers. Revered as a 'man of three languages' — Latin, Greek, and Hebrew — Oecolampadius was well positioned to reread the Bible with reform in mind.

Churchmen like him were bringing reform, moreover, not only to such prominent doctrines and practices as justification and the Lord's Supper, but also to the Church's ethic of sexual renunciation, most notably clerical celibacy,⁶ and these particular reforms had significant implications for women. Scholars have debated for a generation now the question whether the social changes brought by the Reformation were good for women, with mixed results.⁷ Some see Protestantism imposing new limits on women through a reinvigorated patriarchal ideology of the household, the closing of women's religious houses, and even the proscription of the public brothel. Others note the Reformation conviction that women and men are equal before God in their capacity for faith, and the narrowing of the gap between

³ In 1528, Oecolampadius married Wibrandis Rosenblatt (1504–1564) the widow of the Basel humanist, Ludwig Keller [Cellarius]. For this woman's eventful life, see the portrayal in R. Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in Germany in Italy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 79–95; cf. L. Haase, *Wibrandis Rosenblatt: ein Leben an der Seite der Reformatoren* (Stuttgart: Edition Anker, 2000).

⁴ The call for wider recognition of Oecolampadius's foundational role in early Protestant tradition is not entirely new. Already in 1854, for example, K. R. Hagenbach had claimed Oecolampadius as a 'Hauptreformer' alongside Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. On this, see K. Hammer, 'Der Reformator Oekolampad (1482–1531)', *Zwingliana* 19, no. 2 (1992): 157. For an introduction to Oecolampadius as exegete, see Peter Opitz, 'The Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work of John Oecolampadius, Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin', in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. 2, *From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. M. Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 407–13. A wide-reaching analysis of the shape of Oecolampadius's exegesis may be found in J. Fisher, 'A Christoscopic Reading of the New Testament Use of the Old: The Early Reformed Exegesis of Johannes Oecolampadius on the Book of Hebrews', doctoral thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, 2013. See also A. Demura, 'Two Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans: Calvin and Oecolampadius', in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex: Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion*, ed. W. Neuser and B. Armstrong (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies, 1997), 165–88.

⁵ See H. O. Old, 'The Homiletics of John Oecolampadius and the Sermons of the Greek Fathers', in *Communio Sanctorum: Mélanges offerts à Jean-Jacques von Allmen*, ed. B. Bobrinsky et al. (Geneva: Editions Labor et Fides, 1982), 239–50; E. W. Northway, 'The Reception of the Fathers and Eucharistic Theology in Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531), with Special Reference to the *Adversus Haereses* of Irenaeus of Lyons', doctoral dissertation, University of Durham, UK, 2008; and for a helpful study of Oecolampadius's exegesis, see D. Poythress, *Reformer of Basel: The Life, Thought, and Influence of Johannes Oecolampadius* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011).

⁶ Describing the impact of the Reformation, Steven Ozment observes that by the 1540s the 'new clergy [...] have married rapidly and in large numbers. Clerical marriage has become as much the mark of the Protestant cleric as belief in the sole authority of Scripture. An unmarried cleric is deemed strange; the reformers play cupid for one another in a rush to share the newly discovered bliss of married life and to make another public statement against Rome.' *Protestants: the Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 27.

⁷ For a brief introduction to these issues, see L. Roper, 'Gender and the Reformation', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 92 (2001): 290–302.

clerics and lay Christians expressed in the doctrine of the ‘priesthood of believers.’ Scholars have examined the extent to which reform in sexual ethics was reflected in the reformers’ readings of the Bible, particularly the story of Eve. Studies have addressed such questions in the cases of Luther and Calvin, but relatively little attention has been paid to Oecolampadius.⁸ Listening in on his interpretation of Eve’s story we hear echoes of developments in early Reformation theology that simultaneously put forward a companionate understanding of marriage and support the subordination of women in public life.

Oecolampadius on Genesis

The published version of Oecolampadius’s exposition of Genesis derives from the lectures on the Bible prescribed in Basel’s Reformation Ordinance. A team of three men offered three distinct lectures. It was an impressive public display. First, Sebastian Münster (1488–1552) would read and comment on the text in the original Hebrew. Next, Oecolampadius would dictate a learned exposition of the text in Latin. Finally, Paul Phrygio (c.1483–1543) would preach a sermon on the text in the vernacular German.⁹ This rather ambitious program imitated the *Prophезei* that had been instituted in Zurich and Strasbourg, and it was seen as a crucial step in establishing the new faith in Basel.

Before he fell ill Oecolampadius delivered thirty-two lectures on Genesis, up to chapter 16. Verbatim student notes on these lectures¹⁰ came into the possession of Wolfgang Capito (1478–1541) when he married Oecolampadius’s widow, Wibrandis. They were edited and published in 1536.¹¹ The lectures epitomize both the preaching for piety to which Oecolampadius had been committed even as a young Catholic priest, as well as the distinctive approach to Scripture he had developed as a reformer, one informed by his study of the Greek Church fathers, particularly John Chrysostom.¹²

An epitaph on the first published page of the Genesis lectures praised Oecolampadius for giving Basel a gift as great as Solon (d. 558 BC) and Lycurgus (d. 730 BC) had given to Athens and Sparta. Thus the publisher announced both the greatness of Oecolampadius and the lofty aspirations of Basel itself, namely, to achieve the stature of the Greek city-states through the establishment of a right godly order based on Scripture. In his preface Capito underscored Oecolampadius’s capacity for inculcating both sound faith and a biblical social order, including a godly wife at the Reformed minister’s side.

⁸ See, inter alia, M. L. Mattox ‘Luther on Eve, Women and the Church’, *Lutheran Quarterly*, NS 17, no. 4 (2003): 456–74; J. L. Thompson, *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah: Women in Regular and Exceptional Roles in the Exegesis of Calvin, his Predecessors, and his Contemporaries* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1992), esp. 65–160. For a broad sampling in early Reformation exegesis of Eve, see J. L. Thompson, *Genesis 1–11*, vol. 1, *Reformation Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

⁹ *Briefe und Akten*, vol. 2, no. 904. Cf. Staehelin’s account in *Lebenswerk*, 580 ff.

¹⁰ Staehelin, *Lebenswerk*, 580.

¹¹ See J. Kittelson, *Wolfgang Capito: From Humanist to Reformer* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 193.

¹² Oecolampadius had translated the Chrysostom’s Genesis sermons. See *Divi Ioannis Chrysostomi, archiepiscopi Constantinopolitani, in totum Geneseos librum homiliae sexagintasex, à Ioanne Oecolampadio hoc anno versae* (Basel: Crantander, 1523).