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The Son of a Peasant

When Martin Luther died, the news was reported throughout Latin Christendom. Soon the story was circulating in Rome that those present at his bedside had seen devils flying out of his body. A far more kindly disposed person declared that with him went Elijah and the chariots of Israel.

By contrast, Luther's birth was a matter of such insignificance that he and his friends later debated the exact year. Moreover, he came from peasant stock and sometimes referred to himself as a peasant, even when he was an adult. No one expected great deeds from peasants. In the late fifteenth century, a person of this class in northeastern Germany commonly farmed a small piece of land. Peasants were occasionally willing to rebel against their lords in defense of their rights. But even then, they were so deeply conservative that they would put their demands in terms of a return to the old ways or "old law." Their little plots of ground in the here-and-now were all they had, and their horizons seldom went beyond them.

Hans and Margaretta Luder

Martin Luther's father, Hans Luder (as the family name was pronounced in the local dialect), was a peasant, but he did not remain one. Circumstances forced Hans Luder and his wife, Margaretta, to leave Möhra, their home village, and move to Eisleben, Germany. Martin Luder, the couple's second son, was born on November 10, 1483, in a house not far from the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in the center of town.[1]

Whatever else might be said of Hans Luder, the young father and husband was a loyal, right-thinking sort of person who could be counted on to do what was best insofar as he understood it. He therefore acted according to the religious dictates of the time. On the morning after the birth of their son, with Margaretta recovering at home, Hans Luder took the newborn to the nearby church to have him baptized. Hans was acting most sensibly in an age when infant mortality ran to 60 percent or more and everyone feared that an unbaptized child who died might forfeit heaven.

The Luders followed custom in yet another way on that christening day. Because November 11 was the Feast of St. Martin, they named their baby Martin.

Hans Luder must have been a desperate man in the months that preceded and followed the birth of his second son. The death of Hans's father had left him with little besides a growing family and a choice. Fortune did not smile on the Luders in Eisleben. So, before the infant Martin was a year old, the family gathered its few possessions and moved to the small town of Mansfeld, which was near the hills about ten miles away. They probably walked and carried everything they owned, either on their backs or on a pull-cart. When they arrived in Mansfeld Hans took a job as a copper miner.

Life in a copper mine in fifteenth-century Germany was far worse than working in a modern coal mine. Landslides, cave-ins, and suddenly rising water were constant, life-threatening possibilities. In addition, the miners were utterly dependent on animal power, and in particular the power of human muscle. Of those who survived physically, many never became more than common laborers. But Hans Luder was uncommon in this regard. Within seven years he had started his own enterprise in the copper business. Not long after that he became a member of Mansfeld's city council. Less than twenty-five years after Martin's birth, Hans and his partners owned at least six mine shafts and two copper smelters. Hans Luder was a determined man.

The Luders raised their children with strict and sometimes harsh discipline, as was common. Years later, Martin Luther recalled that his mother had once beaten him until his hands bled merely for taking a nut from the kitchen table. Luther's father once caned him so severely for a childish prank that Martin became deeply resentful and stayed away from the man. Luther observed that his parents' discipline lacked

1. Most of the information, details, and anecdotes regarding Luther's early life, as reported here, come from Boehmer, *Road to Reformation*. For this second edition, *Martin Brecht, Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483–1521* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), was also consulted.

the balance of affection, making him a timid child. In the end, father Hans had to come to his son for reconciliation. On the other hand, he acknowledged that Hans and Margaretta "sincerely meant well."[2]

Hard Times

The late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries were in the middle of what historians refer to as the Renaissance, and Luther was a contemporary of truly extraordinary people, including Machiavelli, Michelangelo, Raphael, Erasmus, and Thomas More. Copernicus's revolutionary book on the solar system was published before Luther died. Christopher Columbus set sail when Luther was halfway through grammar school, and Luther was aware of the discovery of the new world. He once remarked that if Europeans did not respond to the gospel, they would likely lose it to the new people across the sea. Even today, the magnificent achievements of Luther's contemporaries and the splendor of life at a Renaissance court excite the imagination. But these images also obscure the realities of everyday life for ordinary people.

In fact, Luther lived in hard times. Life in these times was tenuous in ways that are nearly impossible for people living in the modern world to appreciate. For example, in Florence at the height of the Renaissance, more than six out of ten infants were either stillborn or died within six months. In addition, these were the years when the Plague ravaged Europe. Most territories experienced multiple attacks, sometimes with catastrophic death tolls. For example, in the city of Strasbourg, which normally had about 25,000 inhabitants, some 16,000 fell to the scourge in one year. In the region around this large city, 300 villages were left deserted and the total land under cultivation did not climb back to normal levels until two centuries later. Other horrifying diseases—such as syphilis and the mysterious "English Sweats"—took their toll as well.

About a century later, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes aptly depicted life in Luther's time as being "nasty, brutish, and short." Even those tough enough to surmount the hazards of disease commonly struggled just to find enough to eat. Transportation networks were primitive, so each area had to be self-sufficient. When food production failed to meet the local need, territories removed from the major waterways were especially vulnerable. A local drought, a terribly wet spring, or an early frost could force grain prices up as much as 150 percent over the previous year.

Speculators, whose numbers included the heads of great churches and

2. WA Tr 3:416 (LW 54:234).

monasteries, were therefore in a position to make enormous profits. Ordinary people simply suffered. Many who had once been employed were reduced to begging for their food and clothing. They could be seen on every street of every village and city. The sheer number of beggars was so overwhelming that the authorities on the west bank of the Rhine would annually combine forces, round up all the undesirables, and force them over to the east bank. On that side of the river the procession of beggars and homeless, the maimed and the insane, would be met by another group of authorities, who marched them into central Germany. But the constant flow of society's outcasts never stopped. A year later the authorities would start the whole process over again.

In one respect, life at the turn of the sixteenth century must be painted in even darker hues than these. It was not just the times that were hard. The people were hardened by the world in which they lived. Many were also exceedingly violent. German peasants were far from being placid workers of the land. They quickly exercised the right of feud—the right to defend one's self and kin and to retaliate for damages sustained. When peasants had grievances—real or imagined—they sought recourse not in the courts but with their fists, knives, or clubs.

While a respectable family such as Luther's might not have engaged in such random violence, they could not entirely escape it. Hans Luder had a younger brother who also lived in Mansfeld. The brother was charged with assault and battery on eleven separate occasions. But people in Mansfeld were fortunate in that the young ruffian was so often brought up on charges. In the early sixteenth century, many serious crimes went unpunished. One of Luther's later followers recalled that one of his professors at the University of Freiburg was struck dead on the street by a wandering soldier. There is no record that the murderer ever had to answer for his crime.

A Father's Ambition

Considering these horrible conditions, Hans Luder's achievements at improving his family's prospects are all the more remarkable. Luther remembered that his father was determined that his children would succeed. Rather than put his son to work in the family business, as other fathers commonly did, Hans Luder sent Martin to the town school, which he attended nearly every day for eight years. In 1497 Hans sent Martin to Magdeburg, a year later to Eisenach, and from there in 1501 to the University of Erfurt. Hans Luder was as ambitious for his son as he was for himself.

Luther was not quite five years old when he entered a school whose

sole purpose was to force the students to learn to read and write Latin in preparation for their later studies. The methods used by his teachers were consistently condemned as "barbaric" by great educators such as Erasmus of Rotterdam. Coercion and ridicule were chief among the pedagogical techniques. The student who had done least well in the morning was required to wear a dunce's cap and was addressed as an ass all afternoon. Corporal punishment was de rigueur: at the Latin school in Mansfeld, a child caught speaking German was beaten with a rod.

Under these conditions, all that the children knew for certain was that they wanted to avoid the beatings and the dunce's cap. But the curriculum was so dull that students found little incentive to meet even this modest objective. Music was the subject that Luther preferred, and in time he became a skilled performer and composer. But not even music was taught so that children might enjoy it, much less that they might express themselves. They were taught music because they had to sing in the church choirs.

Most of the time was spent on Latin, for which these poor beginners had only a primer and lists of words to memorize. To accomplish this task, they also learned by heart the basic catechism: that is, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles' Creed. When they had learned enough Latin, they were allowed to proceed to the second class. There they were introduced to the joys of memorizing declensions and conjugations. But advancement did not mean less abuse. Luther later recalled that he was caned fifteen times one morning for not having mastered the tables of Latin grammar.

In 1497, at the age of thirteen, Luther had learned Latin well enough to be sent away to school. His first stop was probably Magdeburg. There he lived and studied at a foundation operated by the Brethren of the Common Life, an extremely pious lay religious organization. Although the beatings probably stopped, it was still no easy life. During out-of-class hours he joined his classmates as they roamed the streets in the children's choirs. These were the origin of the modern practice of caroling. But these boys caroled all year long; far from Christmas revelers, they were beggars who became adept at using this accepted means for students to acquire food and drink.

Eisenach

Circumstances changed somewhat when Luther was sent to Eisenach a year later. There he found relatives on his mother's side who could keep an eye on him, but were themselves so poor that they could not even provide shelter. His daily life therefore remained, at least for a

time, more or less the same. He continued to sing in the children's choirs and had little, if anything, to spend on frivolities. In this he was indistinguishable from the vast majority of his classmates. At some point during his stay, however, Luther apparently impressed a well-to-do woman from a family of merchants named Schalbe. The matron of the family arranged for him to stay at the home of one of her relatives and to take his meals with another. He may have been required to tutor their children, but after 1498 life undoubtedly became a bit easier for the teenaged Luther.

The three years at Eisenach also saw a change of far greater significance for Luther's future development. He found a teacher, the school's headmaster, John Trebonius, who awakened Luther's imagination while sharpening his mind. Trebonius certainly must have instilled a very different atmosphere in this school from what prevailed at Mansfeld, for there Luther also struck up a lifelong friendship with a teacher named Wiegand Geldennupf. These men were more than figures of authority, and they had more to teach than rote memorization of Latin vocabulary and grammar. As Luther neared the end of his studies, he was not only able to give speeches in Latin, but also to write essays and poetry. He also read some of the ancient authors, entering the world of Aesop, Terence, and Virgil. The great pleasure he derived from these studies showed later in his life as he sat down to translate Aesop's Fables into German and insisted that everyone must be a student of the classics and of history.

Trebonius and Geldennupf recognized Luther's ability. It was undoubtedly they who recommended that the young man, then seventeen years old, continue his studies at a university. Just what considerations led Hans Luder to decide in favor of this plan cannot be known. It was unusual for a man in his position to send his son to the university. Luder was, however, aware that even for commoners a university education opened up careers in the church, in law, and in medicine. Although Hans Luder's own business was barely breaking even, he sent his son to study at the University of Erfurt.

Aside from his intelligence and the fact that he had formal education, there was no evident difference between Luther and any other German boy who passed into young adulthood near the turn of the sixteenth century. There was also nothing in particular that set Luther apart in his religious life. To be sure, his family was diligent in its religious practices. But they also appear to have been perfectly conventional. Indeed, Hans Luder was one of a number of townsmen who sought a special indulgence for St. George's Church in Mansfeld in 1497. This act can almost be considered a normal civic, as well as religious, duty for

someone of his stature in the town. Young Luther sang in the children's choirs during services, and he sang in the streets as well. But so did the other students. Religion was something that Luther experienced during his early years but there is no evidence that he thought about it overly much or even tried to understand it.

Spiritual Security

The religion practiced by people of the sixteenth century was much like the world in which they lived. Just as they struggled to achieve material security in their daily lives, the also struggled to gain spiritual security. Salvation was something to be earned, and so religion required work.

It was an age of pilgrimages. People were exhorted to travel in groups to this or that shrine in order to work off the penalties for the sins they had committed. Frequently enough, they temporarily took up the life of apostolic poverty and begged for their sustenance as they traveled.

It was also an age of saints and relics. The faithful were taught that praying to the saints or venerating their relics would atone for individual sins of both omission and commission. It is likely that Luther came of age praying to St. Anne, the mother of Mary and the patron saint of miners. To assist believers in their prayers, the major churches and shrines collected pieces of bone or hair or clothing—relics—that were alleged to have belonged to one saint or another. Some collections even boasted of drops of milk from the Virgin's breast or splinters from the cross of Christ. In Luther's day, a portion of the skull of St. Anne was said to reside in the city of Mainz.

It was an age of death. Painters, sculptors, and woodcarvers seized on this theme, and the "Dance of Death" became one of the most common motifs in late medieval art. Like the Pied Piper, the skeletal Grim Reaper with scythe in hand led representatives of every social group twirling off to their own inevitable end.

Above all, it was an age of fire and brimstone. No one could escape knowing that there was a judgment to come. Christ himself was commonly pictured not just on the cross, but seated on his throne. Coming from one side of his head was a lily, symbolizing the resurrection. From the other side came a sword. The burning religious question of the time was: How can I avoid the sword and earn the lily?

The church had an answer to this question. By the time Luther was born it had been sharpened into one short command: "Do what is in your power to do!" "Use well your natural capacities and whatever special gifts have been granted you."[3] Then, through the power of the church, God would add his grace and smile. Although they by no means

understood (nor were they intended to understand) just how this happened, people like the Schalbes and Luther's parents believed and acted in accordance with what the church told them.

Others did far more. Luther never forgot seeing Prince William of Anhalt, who had renounced his noble estate to become a Franciscan monk and to spend his life as a beggar. "He had fasted so often, kept so many vigils, and so mortified his flesh," Luther later wrote, "that he was the picture of death, just skin and bones."[4] As a noble, Prince William was certainly exceptional, but there were so many people zealously working out their salvation that the city of Marseilles passed a law forbidding religious beggars from passing its walls. Nearly every city sought at least to control them.

Sin, Confession, Penance

Most people, however, were not so zealous in their efforts to guarantee their salvation. Leaders of the church therefore tried to make sure that everyone at least thought about the status of their souls. Chief among their methods was the obligation to confess one's sins to a priest. At least once a year (commonly at the beginning of Lent, but the more often the better), every man, woman, and child admitted to Communion was obligated to go to their priest and confess all the sins they had committed since their previous visit.

"Confessors"—those who heard confessions—followed prescribed manuals that helped guide the rigorous examination. A priest would begin by asking what sins a penitent wished to confess to almighty God. When the response was insufficiently detailed or when the penitent, now on his or her knees on the stone floor, could not remember any particular sins, the confessor would begin asking questions. "Have you ever become angry with your spouse?" "Do you wish your house were as good as your neighbor's?" For adolescent boys, "Do you ever have 'wet dreams'?" For girls, "Were you dancing with the young men at the town fair?" For those who were married, "Have you had sexual relations with your spouse for any purpose other than having children?" Or, "Did you use any but the standard position?" Or, "The last time you and your husband (or wife) had sexual intercourse, did you enjoy it or experience any feelings of pleasure?" The theologians debated whether sexual relations within marriage were serious sins, but all agreed that they were sins, at least in principle. Therefore even this most ordinary

3. Cited by E. Jane Dempsey Douglass, *Justification in Late Medieval Preaching: A Study of John Geiler of Keiserberg* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 142.
4. WA 38:105. For an explanation of citations and translations see Notes (beginning on p. 245).

human activity had to be confessed before the throne of a righteous God.[5]

The church also made it clear that people had to be purged of all the sins they had failed to confess and work off in the here-and-now. If they did not do so, they would pay the price in purgatory, where they would make up for every unremitted sin before they could see the gates of heaven. Given this situation, there can be little wonder that one of the first things Johann Gutenberg issued from his newly developed movable-type printing press was what the church at the time called an indulgence. This was granted in exchange for a "gift" to the church and released the donor from the fires of purgatory for a specified time. Gutenberg's form was much like a modern legal document. It came complete with a blank space for the purchaser's name and another space for how much time in purgatory they had escaped. Indulgences were very popular.

So the theologians composed more manuals. These instructed priests on how to hear final confessions and how to reassure people that their sins would not keep them from heaven. People feared for their eternal destiny, after all. They did not want to spend eternity suffering in Hell. And so the church offered care, guidance, activity, and assurance for such souls. If one's conscience was troubled, it would be relieved by some act of penance, whether several "our Fathers," an "Ave Maria," or, in the case of more grievous sins, a pilgrimage to a shrine or the purchase of an indulgence.

At the turn of the sixteenth century, the religion that was taught to the people was very much like the world in which those people lived. Much as the world sometimes added good fortune to a person's labors, in this realm the church added grace to one's good works so they would be complete and acceptable to God. But in each realm, hard work was still essential.

Erfurt

Such was the religion that a young, swarthy man of medium height took with him as he trudged off to the University of Erfurt in May 1501. His steps took him to the southeast, through the town of his birth, out onto a broad plain, over some hills, and finally to Erfurt itself. Erfurt was a city of hills, woods, streams, and the spires of many churches, including a cathedral (dedicated to St. Mary) that rose up out of the tallest hill and presided over all like a brooding citadel. Churchgoers had to climb a

5. The description is based upon Thomas Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 162ff.

great pile of stone steps just to reach it from the city below. Nothing in the city conveyed the awe and majesty of God with as much as did this great, stone presence.

In the city below, the university's few small buildings gathered around a pleasant stream. The buildings were no more than necessary structures to house the "company of masters and scholars" that made up the university itself. When Luther arrived, he was inscribed in the great matriculation book as "Martinus Ludher de Mansfeld" and, like all students, assigned to a bursa, where for the first years he would eat, sleep, and carry on his studies under the supervision of the master of the house.

The bursa was nothing like a modern dormitory, but had far more the character of a monastery. All the students dressed alike and lived by the strict rules of the bursa and the university. They arose at the same time, began every day with worship and prayers, ate their meals together, participated in other prescribed religious services together, and studied the same subjects. Those who broke the rules were disciplined by the master, the student censor (really an internal spy), or any of the university's many proctors. Students were most definitely not left to go their own way.

Luther came of age in Erfurt and he thrived in its atmosphere. Here it became apparent that he was not just another eager student, but extraordinarily able and blessed with a sharp and penetrating mind. University statutes required that students be enrolled at least one year before they presented themselves for the Bachelor of Arts degree. Luther received his degree in one year. The statutes also required a minimum length of time before one could take the master's examination. Again Luther met the race against time, and in January 1505 he passed the examination, second in his class of seventeen.

Students sometimes attain such records at the expense of the friendships and enjoyment that are so much a part of university life. Not Luther. His companions later nicknamed him "the Philosopher" perhaps in recognition of his skill at the disputations, or public debates, that were crucial to teaching and learning at a late medieval university.

If there had been something odd about Luther, some streak of earnestness, melancholy, or rebellion, no classmate reported it later. The only such assertions came from the pens of officials who later opposed Luther—men such as Johannes Cochlaeus, who fabricated stories about Luther's early years even though they had met only once, in 1521. Instead, the young Luther appears to have been just another fun-loving and high-spirited student. It seems certain that he possessed a keen intellect but he otherwise did not stand out much from his classmates.

A Professional Education

The most important thing to know about the young man Luther during these years is what he was taught, and therefore how he came to think as he moved through the university and into adulthood. In many respects the organization of teaching and learning in a late medieval university such as Erfurt was very different from what students experience today. In principle, every university of that time was divided into four faculties, each of which governed its own affairs. The arts faculty consisted of those who were masters of arts and who did the preparatory work with candidates for both the bachelors and masters degrees. Above them were the three professional faculties of law, medicine, and—the "queen of the sciences"—theology.

Strictly speaking, only those who taught in these three faculties and who held the title of doctor (or teacher) were professors. But Luther's own teachers were also students in one of these higher faculties. Predecessors of modern university teaching assistants, these teachers shaped the learning of the arts students to fit the demands of the curriculum in the professional faculties. Although Luther was technically a student of the liberal arts, his university education was a professional one in the strictest sense of the term.

The most important subjects for Luther lay in what educators of the time called the trivium, which was composed of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. This included many of the subjects that today are associated with the liberal arts. To them were added the quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. But for Luther the trivium was the more important of the two. Grammar focused on the explication of certain classical texts, in particular the ancient Roman authors, such as Cicero. Rhetoric, technically the art of public speaking, also included advanced written composition, poetry, the moral essays of figures such as Seneca, and portions of the Bible. Dialectic, however, ruled over all. It was the dialectical mode of thinking that made scholasticism and "the schoolmen," as they were called, distinctive, for dialectic was the cornerstone of the professional faculties.

If dialectic—the art of discussing truth claims—ruled over the other disciplines in the trivium, then Aristotle ("the father of those that know," as he was called) ruled over dialectic. His books on logic, chiefly the Prior and Posterior Analytics (as summarized in popular textbooks), were the principal sources for teaching students how to think. In more advanced work, they studied selections from his Metaphysics and Ethics as topics on which they could demonstrate their skills. Nothing was more important than learning how to think in this logical and orderly

way, and nothing was accorded more time in the typical day of students and masters. Every day featured disputations in which teachers assigned students a thesis or set of theses which they were required to defend according to the strict rules of logic.

At special times the professors would appear at what were called *quodlibetal disputations*—public debates at which experts would argue with all comers on any topic of interest. This event was the intellectuals' equivalent of a medieval tournament, but one fought with words rather than lances. When the professors tired of the melee, or when the major points had been covered, they might beckon to a favored student and invite him to continue the battle. Given his nickname, "the Philosopher," Luther was probably chosen more than once.