

Preface

“In most big libraries, books by and about Martin Luther occupy more shelf room than those concerned with any other human being except Jesus of Nazareth.”¹ These words appeared in print in 1982, one year before the 500th anniversary of Luther’s birth. The year 1983 then brought with it an additional avalanche of exhibitions, commemorations, lectures, festivals, articles, and still more new books. In the self-consciously Marxist state of the German Democratic Republic, the observation of Luther’s birth even overwhelmed the 100th anniversary celebration of Karl Marx’s death. Such is the enduring importance of Luther the reformer.

This extraordinary interest in an extraordinary man reaches back almost half a millennium. Even in his own time, Luther was a “media personality,” the first such in three thousand years of western history. “We have become a spectacle,” he once remarked of himself and his colleagues. He and his followers have been termed “obedient rebels.” Others called him a seven-headed devil. At least one of his closest colleagues insisted that he was a prophet—perhaps even Elijah—sent by God himself. He was a subject of controversy then just as he is now.

People still find themselves taking sides on the question of Luther. No matter what he himself really said or did, the sheer bulk of his writings (more than 100 quarto volumes in its modern edition) contains plenty of grist for everyone’s mill. Consequently a bewildering variety of well-known people have claimed him as their own, ranging from both orthodox and pietist Lutheran theologians of the 16th and 17th centuries to the Wesley brothers, to Francis Bacon, Handel, and Bach, and including both Nazi propagandists such as Josef Goebbels and a martyr under Fascism such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

1. John M. Todd, *Luther: A Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), xvi.

Luther's lasting memorial may in fact be the so-called Luther Renaissance of the 20th century that has crammed books about him into research libraries all over the world. As a result, Luther is so widely known that it is entirely appropriate to ask why there should be yet another biography of the man.

The primary purpose of this book is to tell the story of Martin Luther to readers who are not specialists in the field of Luther studies and who have no desire to become ensnared in the arguments of specialists. It seeks to pluck the fruit of scholarly discussion for the benefit of general readers.

Other biographies of Luther have been written for just such an audience. The most notable among them is Roland Bainton's *Here I Stand*,² which has been read and loved for more than 30 years. But that book itself suggests reasons for writing a new biography of Luther.

In the first place, Luther research has advanced greatly during the past several decades. Professor Bainton's insights into the concerns and convictions of the young Luther remain astounding, but when he wrote *Here I Stand*, the volcano of recent work on Luther's early development had scarcely begun to rumble.³ Now a generation of research makes it possible to go beyond Bainton's brilliant guesses and trace the genesis of Luther the reformer with great precision.

At the same time, historians of the Reformation have been doing far more than simply adding one piece after another to the jigsaw puzzle of the young Luther. Scholars no longer content themselves with studying Luther's formal theology, but also examine the theological and religious traditions in which he was trained, the actual religious practices of his time, and the conditions of daily life in the 16th century. They have even brought the insights of modern psychology to their work. As a result, it is now possible to provide general readers with a much clearer picture of the man and his career.

In addition, the ecumenical movement had scarcely outgrown its infancy as Bainton wrote his biography at the end of the 1940s. Consequently he and most authors of his era were happily partisan in their approach to Luther. They felt obliged to justify his actions as well as to underline his faithful defense of what they took to be the true faith. By contrast, recently John Todd, the English Catholic scholar, wrote a biographical account of Luther's early years and came to much the

2. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950).

3. The most recent general account of the literature is by Mark U. Edwards Jr., "Martin Luther," in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Steven Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), 59–83. See also Helmar Junghans, "Aus der Ernte des Lutherjubiläums," in *Lutherjahrbuch* 53 (1986): 55–138.

same conclusions as did the Protestant Bainton. So too has Father Daniel Olivier of Paris in two of his recent works.⁴

Another limitation of previous biographies of Luther is that no single-volume work has treated his entire career. The vast majority, such as those by Bainton and Todd, E. G. Rupp, Martin Brecht, and Heinrich Boehmer (to name but a few),⁵ focus with great care and insight on Luther's "road to Reformation," to cite a common subtitle. But in doing so they virtually end the man's career with the dramatic confrontation at Worms in 1521, or with the Peasants' War, the debate with Erasmus, and his marriage in 1525, or with the Diet of Augsburg in 1530.

Some biographers have appended brief vignettes on various aspects of Luther's later public and personal life. But there is such general ignorance regarding his mature years that a few scholars have begun to concentrate on them alone. Even Luther's "middle years" (1521–1531) are so poorly known that the late dean of Luther scholars, Heinrich Bornkamm, devoted an entire volume (posthumously published) just to them. In addition, the fine recent studies of H. G. Haile and Mark U. Edwards seek to lay bare Luther's last decade.⁶ But this piecemeal treatment of Luther leaves the unfortunate impression that the reformer lived one short life, or maybe two lives, or perhaps even three distinct lives.

Martin Luther in fact lived one multifaceted life that is remarkable both for its achievements and for the internal logic by which it unfolded. This biography seeks to present this one life to this generation of readers in one volume. In doing so, it attempts to bring the latest scholarship to bear on Luther and to treat all of his life with reasonably equal coverage. Above all, it seeks to draw as faithful a picture as possible of the whole man.

Biography—or any historical writing—is more than the sum of "the facts" about the subject. At the very least, a writer selects and presents this information in order to provide the present with an interpretation of the past. In addition, such interpretation is a much more subtle matter than simply deciding whether Luther wore a white hat or a black hat. It requires an accurate description of his career, close attention to his character, a clear understanding of the world in which he lived, and the relationships among these various elements.

4. Todd, *Luther*. Daniel Olivier, *The Trial of Martin Luther* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1978) and *Luther's Faith* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1983).

5. E. Gordon Rupp, *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964). Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483–1521* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). Heinrich Boehmer, *Martin Luther, Road to Reformation* (Cleveland: World, 1967).

6. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career, 1521–1530* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). H. G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980). Mark U. Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1983).

Failure to be fully sensitive to these matters has led to some curious results in recent times. Most scholars (in particular, many Luther specialists who are theologians by training) treat him almost as if he were a theological mind that floated unconcernedly above the real world in which he lived. The many accounts that virtually end his life in 1521 or 1525 do so in part because they focus almost solely on his theology. They present Luther's life as having been complete by one or another of these dates on the grounds that by that time his theological development was essentially finished. In a few of the purely doctrinal studies, such as those by Gerhard Ebeling or Paul Althaus.⁷ Luther appears to have been a disembodied intellect that lived in the realm of pure thought.

At the same time, an influential minority of scholars has employed the insights of psychology, and sometimes even of psychoanalysis, in an effort to penetrate beneath Luther's religious faith and theological thinking to the structure of his personality. The most well-known of these is the work of Erik Erikson, who found in Luther an "identity crisis" of the sort that modern children frequently suffer. The playwright John Osborne followed Erikson and then pictured the Luther of 1525 as a sort of Macbeth who was frozen into a state of indecisive agonizing by a revolution he himself had unleashed.⁸ It must be granted that these approaches have helped make Luther understandable to a world that is very different from his own. But left by themselves, they have also tended to trivialize the reformer's actions and concrete concerns into mere products of his psychological state. The historic figure disappears, and Luther becomes no more than a curious psyche.

The work of another group of scholars has come to much the same sort of implied distortion, but by an alternate route. These historians have by and large forsaken the study of individuals to seek out long-range social, economic, demographic, intellectual, theological, and political trends in western history. Some go so far as to suggest that history is governed by natural laws or impersonal processes within which individuals play a largely involuntary role.

Older Marxist scholarship provides the most obvious example of this assumption at work.⁹ To them, Luther's significance lies in the fact that

7. Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970). Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).

8. Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York: Norton, 1962). John Osborne, *Luther* (New York: New American Library, 1963).

9. See Abraham Friesen, *Reformation and Utopia: The Marxist Interpretation of the Reformation and Its Antecedents* (Wiesbaden: 1974) and Thomas A. Brady Jr., "Social History," in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Steven E. Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), 162–81, for a more positive reading. The most recent and carefully nuanced treatment is Brent O. Peterson, "Workers of the World Unite—for God's Sake!": Recent Luther Scholarship in the German Democratic Republic," in James D. Tracy,

he played a pivotal role in preparing the way for the proletarian revolution. Other examples include social historians such as Fernand Braudel and Philippe Ariès. By virtue of its effect on the picture of Luther, the most recent work of historians of dogma such as Jaroslav Pelikan deserves inclusion here as well.¹⁰ Taken together, such studies have the virtue of making it possible as never before to see that Luther was very much subject to the economic, social, religious, political, and theological conditions of the times in which he lived. By the same token, their overriding concern for the forest inclines them to ignore the mighty oak in its midst. Luther is seen as no more than one factor in the general period under investigation. He is viewed as having been overwhelmed by the tides of impersonal historical change.

Each of these three ways of looking at Luther has serious limitations. The first ignores Luther's humanity and turns him into a theological system. The second sidesteps the fact that he was a theologian and pastor and presents him as a bundle of social or psychic impulses. The third loses sight of his significance altogether. None confronts the full reality of the man.

The life of Luther exhibited two characteristics, and a biographer must treat them both. In the first place, this man had a public career that transcended its own time and still draws attention today. Second, Luther was someone who had an accessible personality; he was a human being who lived in a particular place and at a particular time.

In these respects, Luther was the first figure in history about whom a biography can actually be written. On the one hand, much is known about his public career, though it needs clarification from time to time. On the other hand, his personality is also accessible, if only because one of Martin Luther's favorite topics for writing and conversation was Martin Luther. His books, actions, and even his table conversations (as recorded by his students) display a man who was keenly aware both of himself and of his pivotal position in history. With Luther it is therefore possible to look closely at both the man and the career that made him famous. An examination of his whole life in this way reveals that the man and his career explain one another. The point of view of this book is that this towering figure is indeed understandable, and that therefore he should be understood.

Luther and the Modern State in Germany, 16th-Century Studies Essays, no. 7 (Kirksville, MO: 16th Century Publishers, 1986), 77–99.

10. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) and Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (New York: Knopf, 1962). Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of Christian Doctrine*. Vol. 4, *Reformation of Church and Dogma* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984).