



A Spiritual Biography

MARTIN
—
LUTHER

HERMAN SELDERHUIS

“Herman Selderhuis gives a well-organized, source-based short account of Luther’s life, putting him into his context. Written by one of the most respected international scholars in Reformation history, this book may be fruitfully used as an introduction to Luther’s life.”

Volker Leppin, theologian and professor of church history, Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen; president, Interdisciplinary Medieval Association

“With a keen eye for the details that make Luther come alive for twenty-first-century readers, and with an ear for those often-false rumors spread by other scholars about the man, Selderhuis guides us through the life of the Wittenberg professor, depicting his genius and his temperament within the context of his time and its challenges. This well-balanced journey at the reformer’s side provides readers with insights into the development of his thought and his path toward prominence and influence that shaped the last quarter century of his life. The often-slighted later years, in which his writings and personality created a sphere of influence equaled by few in any age, are here given due attention, with helpful explanations of the setting in which Luther’s reform movement matured.”

Robert Kolb, international research emeritus professor, Institute for Mission Studies, Concordia Seminary; author, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith*; coauthor, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology*

“The complexity of Luther is staggering, but Herman Selderhuis has given us a detailed portrait of the reformer that captures both his blemishes and the beauty of his faith in Christ. This book is a fascinating read about one of the most significant figures of history. Both students of Christian history and admirers of Reformation theology will find it helpful.”

Joel Beeke, president, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“There have been more books written about Martin Luther than any other figure in the last millennium of church history. With such a Luther-glutted market, what more could possibly be said about him? Well, this latest volume from the hand of the gifted Reformation scholar Herman Selderhuis does indeed give us a fresh perspective on the German reformer. With his own translations of Luther’s writings and his comprehensive knowledge of Luther’s world, both theological and social, this new biography is both deeply instructive about the things that mattered most to Luther and a delight to read. This is how biography should be written!”

Michael A. G. Haykin, professor of church history and biblical spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Among the many new biographies of Martin Luther, this one stands out for its fresh engagement with Luther’s own assessment of his life and work. Well researched and engagingly presented.”

Timothy George, founding dean, Beeson Divinity School; general editor, Reformation Commentary on Scripture

“What makes this Luther biography distinct is its explicit attention to Martin Luther’s spiritual journey as a sixteenth-century person haunted by his demons and driven by his passions, and the way it presents Luther’s own voice and reflection throughout, paired with a restrained but poignant analysis that invites the reader to dig deeper. Luther is introduced as a ‘problem’ in his church context with evolving roles in which he is shaped by his relationships. He is assessed as a ‘unique phenomenon’ on the one hand, while as a flesh-and-blood human being with a temperament, strong emotions, and tragic ailments on the other. Selderhuis’s clearly written and immediately engaging narrative, with wit, offers an abundance of detail and apparatus for the reader to understand one of the most fascinating personalities in Christian history and the complexities of his Reformation hermeneutics.”

Kirsi Stjerna, First Lutheran, Los Angeles / Southwest California Synod
Professor of Lutheran History and Theology, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary; author, *Women and the Reformation*

“This richly illustrated and succinctly written book, based on anything but superficial knowledge, is very much a life of Luther for everyone. While announcing itself as a ‘spiritual biography,’ it actually presents Luther in body and soul in his day-to-day contexts. Selderhuis catches very well Luther as a reformer stumbling daily from one unconcealed existential crisis to another, often beset with spiritual, mental, religious, family, political, physical, and personality problems. Here we have the real Luther—potent prophet of God, astonishing theologian, prolific writer, and phenomenal communicator indeed, but also a flawed genius whose attributes included buffoonery, vulgarity, vindictiveness, and downright rudeness. While many have viewed the reformer as a Hercules of the faith and the thirteenth apostle, this book reminds us that Luther was also no saint and that he had no pretensions to be one.”

W. Ian P. Hazlett, honorary professorial research fellow, University of Glasgow; editor in chief, *Reformation and Renaissance Review*; author, *The Reformation in Britain and Ireland*; coauthor, *A Useable Past*

“At this half-millennium anniversary of the birth of the Protestant faith, there is scarcely a better place to (re)discover Martin Luther than in this fresh biography by internationally recognized Reformation scholar Herman Selderhuis. Here is where to start your investigation of an amazing man whose remarkable courage, controversial ministry, and persuasive writings changed the world—for good and for ill. Don’t miss reading this fascinating, fun, and poignant foray into the spiritual life and tumultuous times of the one who, as Calvin described, ‘gave the Gospel back to us.’”

Peter Lillback, president and professor of historical theology and church history, Westminster Theological Seminary

“*Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography* offers a new and fascinating approach to Luther’s life. In this book, political and theological contexts are paid attention to, but priority is given to the story of Luther’s religious life, from childhood to old age. The account is based on an extensive use of primary sources—not least Luther’s letters and *Table Talk*—and the reformer’s own words are frequently quoted. At the same time, the interpretation of Luther’s texts is closely related to specific places and concrete situations in his life. In this way, the reader is brought closer to Luther’s person than what is often the case in other biographies.”

Tarald Rasmussen, professor of general church history and research director, University of Oslo; editor, *Teologisk Tidsskrift*

“Herman Selderhuis is a fine scholar but also a churchman and a teacher. Thus, he writes with an enviable, conversational ease, which makes his teaching accessible to the nonspecialist audience. In this brief biography of Martin Luther, he brings the reformer alive, from his birth in humble circumstances to his death as the most (in)famous man in Europe. Those who have never encountered the narrative of Luther’s life before will find this an accessible and satisfying introduction that wears its learning lightly and points to the deep truths to which Luther’s life and thought testified.”

Carl R. Trueman, Paul Woolley Chair of Church History and professor of church history, Westminster Theological Seminary; author, *The Creedal Imperative* and *Luther on the Christian Life*

Martin Luther

Martin Luther

A Spiritual Biography

Herman Selderhuis

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Timeline of Luther's Life

- 1483 November 10: Born in Eisleben, Saxony
November 11 (The Feast of St. Martin): Baptized in the St. Peter and Paul Church of Eisleben
- 1484 Moves with family to Mansfeld
- 1490 Starts at the Latin school of Mansfeld
- 1497 Sent by his parents to a school in Magdeburg
- 1498 Allowed to move to Eisenach, where he attends the priests' school associated with St. Georgenkirche
- 1501 Begins his legal study in Erfurt
- 1505 Early 1505: Completes his master's degree and begins his actual study of law in Erfurt
July 2: Caught in a terrible thunderstorm and promises to become a monk
July 17: Enters the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt
- 1507 Consecrated as priest; reads his first mass
- 1508 Starts his theological studies at the University of Wittenberg
- 1509 Obtains two doctorates in theology and starts teaching but is recalled to the monastery in Erfurt soon after
- 1510–1511 Journeys to Rome because of a conflict within the Augustinian order and returns to continue studying at the University of Wittenberg
- 1512 Obtains a doctorate in theology and becomes professor of (biblical) theology
- 1513–1515 Starts teaching, beginning with his *Lectures on the Psalms*
- 1515–1516 Delivers his *Lectures on Paul's Epistle to the Romans*
- 1516–1517 Delivers his *Lectures on Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*
- 1517 October 31: Posts his "Ninety-Five Theses"

12 *Timeline of Luther's Life*

- 1517–1518 Delivers his *Lectures on the Epistle to the Hebrews*
- 1518 Early 1518: Publishes *Sermon on Indulgence and Grace*
April: Attends Heidelberg Disputation
October 12–14: Appears before Cajetan at Augsburg
- 1519 Continues his *Lectures on the Psalms*; attends conference in Leipzig with Eck and Carlstadt
- 1520 August 12: Publishes *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*
October 6: Publishes *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*
Mid-November: Publishes *On the Freedom of a Christian*
December 10: Burns the papal bull threatening excommunication
- 1521 January 3: Excommunicated
April 17–18: Attends hearing at the imperial Diet of Worms after a long journey through Germany but does not retract his books
May 4: Kidnapped and taken to the Wartburg, where he starts translating Erasmus's edition of the Greek New Testament into German
May 8: Banished from the empire and declared an outlaw
Summer: Hears about the escalating situation in Wittenberg
- 1522 March 1: Returns to Wittenberg and starts to set matters straight
March 9: Begins his "Invocavit Sermons"
- 1523 April 4: Helps twelve nuns escape from the monastery in Nimbschen
- 1525 June 13: Marries Katharina von Bora
- 1526 June 7: First son is born
- 1529 Early 1529: Publishes Large and Small Catechisms
Spring: Lutheran members of the imperial Diet of Speyer protest its confirmation of the Edict of Worms, giving birth to the term *Protestant*
September 30: Arrives for the Colloquy of Marburg
- 1530 April–October: Stays in the Coburg during the Diet of Augsburg
- 1534 September: Completes translation of Old and New Testament and Apocrypha
- 1535 Begins his *Lectures on Genesis*
Appointed dean of the theological faculty at the University of Wittenberg
- 1536 May 29: Signs Wittenberg Concord

- 1536–1537 December 1536–February 1537: Meets in Schmalkalden, which, after two months of discussion, leads to the formation of the Schmalkaldic League
February 1537: Leaves Schmalkalden dangerously ill
- 1539–1541 Revises his translation of the Bible
- 1541 Conducts the ordination of Nicholas von Amsdorf to become bishop of Nuremburg
- 1542 Publishes *Concerning the Jews and Their Lies*
- 1544 December: Publishes *Contra the 32 Articles of the Theological Sharpshooters in Leuven*
- 1545 December: Publishes *Contra the Papacy in Rome Established by the Devil*
- 1546 February 14: Gives last sermon (in the St. Andreas Church in Eisleben)
February 18: Dies in Eisleben
February 22: Buried in Wittenberg

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Figure 0.1 Map of Germany

Introduction

Luther was a problem. Certainly for the pope and the emperor, but often he was also a problem for his fellow reformers. Prone to outbursts of rage and coarse language, Luther was frequently stubborn and undiplomatic, even with allies. As one fellow reformer put it,

He's a person who often loses his path and who is reluctant to consider a return: he's a human who fears God uprightly and earnestly seeks his honor but becomes irritated the moment he is reprimanded. This is how God gave him to us, and this is how we will have to use him.¹

The man who had to learn humility as a monk had an ego that combined with his quick temperament to swiftly make enemies and exasperate even his most intimate circle of friends. "We must, and we will take him the way he is," John Calvin remarked, "because it was Luther who gave the Gospel back to us."²

Of course, Luther could only "give back" the gospel to the church after he had found it himself. And he had long been searching for it. He was a man searching for God. Luther was a phenomenon—a fascinating human being. His opponents thought so too. Luther consistently displayed a brilliant richness of thought, a command of language, and an irascible humor. He was honest about his struggles of faith, often using them to comfort and encourage others. The same ego that could sometimes alienate people also buffered his sense of calling and resolve, enabling him to achieve an astonishing number of accomplishments in his life.

The temptation for any biographer of Luther is to merely let the

reformer speak for himself. In this biography I have attempted both to reveal Luther in his own words and to give the reader an objective portrait. My hope is that I have at least achieved a balance.

It should be said at the outset that this is a biography of Martin Luther and not a history of the Reformation, though of course we cannot understand Luther without at least a basic understanding of the historical context that formed him. The translations from Luther's works, letters, and *Table Talk* are nearly all mine. The endnotes indicate where I used existing translations. Translating Luther is nearly impossible since his German and Latin are as dynamic as the man himself. I hope some of that dynamism comes through in this book.

Child (1483–1500)

Devils Everywhere

God, the Devil, and death were everyday topics in the world into which Martin Luther was born. As a child, Luther learned that God was a Judge more righteous than merciful. The Devil was out to snatch your soul and turn women into witches. Death was not the end of life, Luther was taught, but instead it was the moment you appear before God and enter purgatory. With these dour lessons firmly in his head, is it any surprise that years later Luther would say that every mention of God was “as a clap of thunder in [his] heart”? The god that Martin Luther was told to believe in as a child was a god who signaled his righteousness chiefly through punishment.¹

The presence of devils and witches certainly did not make life more pleasant. Luther grew up regularly hearing and thinking about Satan. In Luther’s time, stories from the Bible and folklore had been blended together to create many terrifying representations of the Devil and his cohorts. Miners, who worked in darkness deep underground, were terrified at the thought of meeting an evil spiritual being.²

Among other things, Luther was taught that the pealing of the church bells would drive out demons, that the Devil influenced the weather, and that he could command the cattle. Luther also believed that a witch had poisoned his brother, almost certainly following the beliefs of his mother, who was convinced that a neighbor was secretly

a witch, preying on the Luther children. The neighbor appeared again in a 1533 comment recorded in Luther's *Table Talk*:

Doctor Martinus told us a lot about sorcery, about anxiety, and about elves, and that his mother had had so many problems with a neighbor who was a sorceress. Therefore, his mother had to do her utmost to remain on good terms with the neighbor by being friendly and forgiving. Whenever the neighbor took one of her children onto her lap, she screamed bloody murder. This woman punished a preacher without even mentioning his name and cast a spell on him so that he had to die. He couldn't be helped with any medicine. She had taken dirt from the ground where he had walked, threw it in water, and bewitched him, because without that earth he could not become better again.³

The accusation of witchcraft devastated many women in Luther's day, and some paid for the rumors with their lives. In the culture in which Martin Luther was raised, the Devil was everywhere and behind everything. Luther relates,

When I was still a boy, a story was told that there was no way that the Devil could cause a quarrel between a man and his wife who really loved each other. Nevertheless, he managed to make it happen using an old woman who put a razor under both their pillows and then told them that they were there. The man found it and murdered his wife. Then the Devil came and, using a long stick, gave the old woman a pair of shoes. When she asked why he wouldn't come near her, he answered her, "Because you are worse than I am, because you accomplished something with that man and woman that I couldn't." In this way we see once again that the Devil is always the enemy of everything that the Lord God brought about.⁴

Luther had difficulty throwing off such superstition, but over time he eventually gained a more theologically responsible view of spiritual warfare. Luther would write that he viewed his frequent stomach ailments as direct attacks from the Devil. According to Luther, that struggle happened especially when he was sitting on the latrine, where he spent quite some time due to his intestinal issues, alternating be-

tween constipation and diarrhea. Luther experienced many physical struggles in that place, and he saw those struggles as attacks of Satan on his work. Moreover, the Devil likes nothing more than to envelop people in a noxious stench, and he manages that especially on the latrine. A person tries his utmost quietly and privately to have his bowel movement, but subsequently, Satan begins to stir in it so that everyone, especially God, will notice that there is a bad smell hanging around him.⁵ The imagery of the latrine as a place where Satan does his filthy work and where a person experiences his lowly position was not new and was already present in a medieval song. What was new was Luther's discovery that this was also the place where the Holy Spirit taught him to combat Satan by trusting in Christ.⁶ Before he would come that far, however, much would still have to take place in Luther's life.

Few Details

Little can be said about Luther's earliest years, simply because we know little about them. Here is what Luther wrote in a letter about his first years:

I was born in Eisleben and also baptized there, namely, in St. Peter's Church. Of course, I cannot remember anything about this, but I believe my parents and the other people from my native town. My parents moved to the neighborhood of Eisenach because most of my family live in Eisenach, and they all knew me and still know me because I went to school there for four years, and no other city knows me as well as this one. . . . The time after this I spent at the University of Erfurt and in the monastery there, until I came to Wittenberg. I also went to Magdeburg for a year, but I was fourteen then. Here you have my life story and where I came from.⁷

Fortunately, we know more about the young Luther than these few sentences indicate. He recounted a lot in his letters but also in his so-called *Table Talk*, which is as famous as it is notorious. Luther did leave us some memory of his earliest years, though it is debatable how much of what he says about himself is accurate.

Name and Face

In Luther's time, surnames varied more in spelling and pronunciation than they do today. Luther's father, Hans, wrote his surname as Lüder, Loder, Ludher, Lotter, Lutter, or Lauther, reflecting the cultural habit of spelling names as they sound. When Martin Luther himself began publishing, it was more important to have a consistently spelled name; thus, from 1517 onward, he used *Luther* exclusively, save for a brief time in which he indulged a mildly elitist habit of using a pen name, *Eleutherios*, a wordplay on the Greek for "free man."

In time, Luther would feel the need to distance himself yet again from his name. He was bothered that he had become synonymous with the Reformation. Luther wrote that everyone who realized that he was bound to the rediscovered Christian truth

must be silent concerning my name and should not call himself Lutheran but Christian. What is Luther? Does the doctrine belong to me? I have not been crucified for anyone. . . . How would I as a poor, sinful bag of maggots [this is the way Luther viewed his body] allow people, the children of Christ, to bear my unwholesome name? I am no master and don't want to be one either. Together with the congregation I share in the universal doctrine of Christ, and he alone is our master.⁸

Regardless of Luther's sentiment, those who followed in his theological legacy would continue to bear his name: Lutherans.

What did Luther look like? In a time in which we are awash with photographs, it's almost unimaginable that someone would reach thirty-seven years of age before appearing in his first portrait. In Luther's time, however, most people were never painted. The images we have of Martin Luther were all made by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), the famous court painter of the elector. The first shows us a scrawny monk with tonsure and serious-looking eyes (see fig. 1.1). This is an image with a message: here stands a serious man and not a heretic with wild plans. Then as now, portraits and images were part of the public relations division. Gradually, Luther becomes fatter. It seems as if the insight that a person cannot earn his way into heaven by means of fasting had convincingly tempted Luther into a calorie-rich lifestyle. It would



Figure 1.1 *Martin Luther, Bust in Three-Quarter View*. Engraving by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1520. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

also become evident that his innards would have difficulty adapting to these foods. He continues to look serious in the portraits, both the ones portraying him as professor and those in which he appears as a married man—clearly, a man you could trust. At least that is the message conveyed in the portraits. They also picture a man whose look makes you restless. In the spring of 1523, a representative from the Polish king visiting Luther wrote, “His face is like his books; his eyes are penetrating and glitter almost fearfully, as you sometimes see with lunatics.”⁹

Origins

I am the son of a farmer; my great grandfather, my grandfather, and my father were real farmers. Actually, I should have become a village head, a sheriff or whatever they would have in a village, a

function that would have placed me just a bit higher than others. But my father moved to Mansfeld, and he became a miner. That's where I come from.¹⁰

Now and again, Luther would recount something about his origins and his childhood, but as those descriptions were almost totally dependent on his memory, the images he created did not always fit with reality. Luther said, for example, that his parents were not well off: "In his youth, my father was a poor miner. On her back my mother carried all the firewood home. That's the way we were brought up. They endured a lot of difficulty, difficulty that the world today does not want to endure anymore."¹¹

In reality, it appears that the poverty suffered by his parents was not as bad as he claimed. Hans Luther (1459–1530) was not a simple miner as portrayed by his son but rather was the enterprising son who had come out of a fairly prosperous farmer's family. He lived in Möhra in Thuringia, and at twenty years old he married Margarethe Lindemann (1460–1531), also twenty (see fig. 1.2). She came from a middle-class family in Eisenach; her brothers were jurists. She was neither the child of bitter poverty mentioned by some of Luther's more romantic biographers nor the whore of the bathhouse invoked by some of Luther's theological enemies.

Luther's father had a younger brother, and in accordance with local inheritance customs, the farm went to the youngest brother, not the eldest. Subsequently, Hans sought employment in copper mining, a growing industry in the county of Mansfeld, which was rich with copper and would thus see a major economic resurgence. Like many other families, the Luthers moved to Mansfeld and purchased a mine. On November 10, the Luthers' second son was born. He was baptized the next day, November 11, on the Feast of St. Martin—Hans and Margarethe named their newborn son after the saint. The baptism took place close by, in the St. Peter and Paul Church. In that time a child's birthday was associated with a saint's day and was deemed to be more important than the actual birth year. Hence it is not definite that Luther was born in 1483, as virtually every biography has claimed. According to newer research, there are good reasons to believe that Luther was actually born a year later, in 1484.



Figure 1.2 *Portrait of Hans Luther, Luther's Father / Portrait of Margarethe Luther, Luther's Mother*. Paintings by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1527. Wartburg-Stiftung, Wartburg.

Whatever year he was born, a year after his birth the family moved a couple of miles farther, to Mansfeld, a small city with approximately two thousand inhabitants. There Hans received a leadership position in the copper mines, thanks to one of Margarethe's uncles. Seven years later he owned three copper smelters, two hundred acres of land, a large farm, a number of buildings, and enough capital to become a prodigious lender. It's not clear exactly how large the family became, but we do know that Martin had four brothers and four sisters. The family's relative prosperity has been confirmed by archeological analyses of the family refuse pit, in which was found seven thousand food remains that clearly testify to the diverse and luxurious meals they would have often enjoyed.

Nevertheless, the times were not always plentiful. Hans was weighted by significant debt, which accrued in the down seasons of the mining business. It would be a mistake to assume that the Luthers lived like royalty. While they enjoyed some variety of food, they also faced economically challenging times. Without any question, Luther

experienced periods of poverty at home. That his parents had to work hard, even when they were financially better off, is obvious from the look on their faces in their portraits. As mentioned above, Luther would recollect years later that his mother gathered firewood and carried it home every day. This shouldn't be interpreted as a sign of destitution but as a typical life for this era's middle-class family.

Impression

Why did Luther give the impression that he had lived his early life in extreme poverty? The best answer is that this description of his life fit his image of himself. Luther wanted to be known as a man who, though the son of a poor, ignoble father, was nevertheless able to successfully oppose a powerful pope and emperor. Luther enjoyed drawing this kind of contrast about himself: "I admit that I am the son of a farmer from Möhra near Eisenach, and yet I am a doctor in the Holy Scriptures and an enemy of the pope."¹² Luther knew that this "David and Goliath" narrative was appealing. At the same time, it would be a mistake, as we will see later, to simply dismiss Luther's account as untrustworthy.

Tourists today can visit the town of Eisleben, where Luther was born and where he died (see fig. 1.3). Shortly before his birth, Luther's family came to Eisleben, and only a few months later they had already left. The house that is now shown as his birthplace is the correct location but is not actually the house in which he was born (which burned down in 1689). Moreover, Luther did not die in the house that they now show as his place of death (he died a few houses down the street, and immediately after his death, they brought him to the house that is now claimed to be the place of his death). Not everything fits, but it is close enough to make a good story. All in all, Eisleben did not actually play a primary role in Luther's life like Mansfeld did. It was there that he grew up until he was fourteen. When he went to Erfurt to study, approximately fifty-five miles from home, he was registered as "Martin Ludher from Mansfelt" (*Martinus ludher ex mansfelt*).

Strict

While Luther's claims of family poverty were exaggerated, his claims of strictness and discipline in his upbringing almost certainly were not.



Figure 1.3 Luther's birth house in Eisleben.
Photo courtesy of Touristoffice Eisleben.

A common form of corporal punishment in Luther's day was a rap on the knuckles. Whether this was an effective method of discipline is questionable, but it certainly made an impression on the young Luther:

My parents brought me up so strictly that it sometimes scared me. My mother once hit me until I bled simply because I had secretly taken a nut. Because of this hard-nosed discipline, they finally drove me into the monastery. Even though they meant well, it made me scared. They did not know the appropriate relationship between someone's character and the manner in which one should be disciplined. You should punish in such a way that you place the apple beside the rod.¹³

Luther would later record that his father had once berated him in frustration for over an hour.¹⁴ The reformer was not bitter about such parenting, and he even admitted that his father had the right to do that, because this little hour was insignificant over against the ten years of work that his father had to devote to him. Besides, this outburst

of rage had not harmed him. This should call into question the very common claim that Luther's strict upbringing had imparted to him a psychological problem that had shaped his idea of God. Aside from the fact that four remarks about a person's upbringing are rather meager data on which to build a psychological profile, there is little evidence of neuroses or other complexes when Luther talks with and about his parents later on. The comforting letter he wrote to his father when he was afraid to die says enough.¹⁵ Luther was relieved to hear that his father, shortly after the reading of this letter, died peacefully and in faith.¹⁶ Luther's opinion of his father is made clear in a letter dated June 5, 1530, to his colleague Philipp Melanchthon, when he heard that his father had passed away:

Today Hans Reinicke wrote me that my dear father, Hans Luther, the old man, has left this life, on Sunday, *Exaudi* (May 29), exactly at one o'clock. His death has made me extremely sad, not only because of my father's nature but also because of his unique affectionate love and because through him, my Creator has given me everything that I am and have. And even though it comforts me that he writes that he died in Christ in the strength of his faith, the grief and the memories of that extremely loving relationship with him, has affected me intimately so much that I have hardly ever despised death as now. But "*the righteous perish . . .*," Isaiah 57:1, because before we really die, we die so frequently. I am now the one who will function as the heir of the Luther name, and I am almost the oldest Luther in the family. Not only coincidentally but also in a legal perspective I have the right to follow him through death into Christ's kingdom. He graciously grants us that right, though we are the most miserable among humanity and a shame of the whole world.¹⁷

These are not the words of someone who needs psychological or emotional recovery from his parents.

Luther expressed the same sentiments to his mother in a later letter.¹⁸ It has been suggested that the lack of correspondence between Luther and his mother indicates a strained relationship, but this is an unnecessary interpretation. More likely, Luther's mother, like many others in her time, could not read. The depression and irritability that Luther would become known for are better attributed to extreme

physical and mental stress, something to which many people today can surely relate. Luther's parents were not perfect, of course, but we are told that his father prayed with his children when they went to bed and that his mother was known as a pious woman.¹⁹ In the context of all the strictness, it is piety, not cruelty, that characterized the Luther home.

School

When Martin was seven years old, his father sent him to the Latin school in Mansfeld. At this time, a Latin school represented the best chance for an elite education; it would prepare young students for a lifetime of scholarship. Though certainly Hans would have seen Latin school as a way to give his son a stable and strong future, Luther would later severely criticize his school years, calling them a time of tortures, a time in which a child learned nothing more than a lot of nonsense.²⁰ These schools were often harsh; Latin was hammered into students' heads and occasionally beaten into them with the rod. Luther recounted that one time he received fifteen stripes because he did not know how to decline a number of Latin words, though he had never been taught how to do this.²¹

Yet the lessons in classics were not lost on him. Years later, Luther would relish the fables of the Greek poet Aesop so much that he published them himself. The music of the school also made an impression on the reformer, especially the Latin prayer that began and ended each day, "Come, O Creator, Spirit Blessed," which Luther eventually reworked and republished.

Luther's World

Luther's childhood context was one of relative prosperity. Luther's family always had plenty of food, plenty of room, and plenty of funding for schools. Most of Luther's childhood friends were expected to work and earn income, as were a majority of children; thus, literacy was often a privilege reserved for those who could afford it. It is difficult for most of us to imagine having few friends who can read or write, but that is the reality in which Luther lived. Luther's world was a world largely without written words.

In the main, it was also a world without images. Images were typically seen only in church, and then likely only a woodcutting. A watery reflection or the mirroring of glass was the most that many people ever beheld. It was a world silent in the countryside but ceaselessly noisy in the city. Luther's world was also a world of odors, a world in which brushing one's teeth was unknown, where people seldom washed or put on clean clothes, a world without underwear, where streets were open sewers, where fleas, flies, and lice were everywhere.

The world at large did not offer Luther much, but it would become determinative for him. It was the world of the Holy Roman Emperor of the German Nation, a name highlighting that it concerned the German portion of the old Roman Empire. That German part consisted of a great number of large and small political principalities, such as city-states, kingdoms, and duchies. This German Empire also included areas such as modern-day Hungary, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, parts of Italy, Luxemburg, and the Netherlands. Though the emperor was the highest sovereign, each nation sought to act as independently as possible. Such independence was possible because the emperor was far removed; Emperor Charles V, for example, was a Spaniard who treated the German portion of his empire as a secondary concern (that is, until Luther launched his reforms).

During a diet (a formal deliberative assembly), more than a hundred sovereigns, princes, counts, and city representatives would gather under the chairmanship of the emperor to discuss imperial matters. For many years these governors had received orders from their spiritual head seated in Rome, the pope. In their opinion, the Roman rulers had too much political power, demanded too much German tax money, did not concern themselves sufficiently with spiritual matters, and were occupied instead with too many secular issues. Princes who didn't want to follow the pope's demands only exacerbated internal strife. In the preceding century, there had been a number of attempts to institute political and ecclesiastical reform, but other than a few local revivals of piety, they had left no lasting impact. Under the surface of German social and religious life lay many explosive issues; Luther would be the one to ignite them.

Luther's world was evolving in more ways. The Middle Ages were

being transformed into a new era. It should be noted that the so-called Dark Ages were often not as dark as its commentators have suggested. Likewise, monasteries were not as corrupt or lethargic as many anti-Catholic critics maintained, both then and later. That the situation was problematic, however, was generally accepted, and many felt that monasteries needed to be changed at least to some degree.

What this means is that the Reformation was not something that originated with Luther. Luther's arrival was not the beginning of demands for reform; indeed, some reforms had actually begun before Luther's work. Accounts about church visitations, for example, reported improvements in the monasteries.²² Luther's work was, however, radically different from these other reforms. Luther was not content to merely fix abuses. He wanted to articulate an entirely different vision of man's relationship to God.

Frightening

When Martin was thirteen, his parents sent him to Magdeburg, a city at that time of approximately twenty-five to thirty thousand inhabitants. He went there together with his friend from Mansfeld, Hans Reinicke. The city was growing stronger in Luther's time, often fortifying its walls. According to Luther, they entered a school of the "Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life,"²³ but there was never such a school in Magdeburg. He did, however, live with people who were followers of the Modern Devotion. It was through this association that Luther became acquainted with the dysfunctions and corruptions of the church. He received Latin instruction at the local cathedral school. Otherwise, very little is known about Luther's stay in Magdeburg. One event in particular, though, left a deep impression on him:

When I went to school in Magdeburg in my fourteenth year, I myself saw one of the princes of Anhalt. It was the brother of the dean and the later bishop Adolf of Merseburg. He was walking on the Breite Strasse in a monk's tunic begging for bread and carrying a cloth bag much like a donkey carrying his load so that he was constantly forced to bend over. His brother monks walked beside him and didn't carry anything, so that the pious prince alone was the best example that clearly showed the world what the meaning

is of the raw reality of a holy life. In the monastery they had given him such a lowly position that he had to perform the same chores as all the other brothers. Additionally, he had fasted so rigorously, kept vigils, and chastised himself so that he looked like death itself. He was not more than skin over bone, and died shortly afterward. . . . Whoever looked at him was stricken with silence and could only feel ashamed of his own situation.²⁴

Luther's stay in Magdeburg was short; a year later his parents allowed him to move to Eisenach, probably under the watch of relatives there. Eisenach was small but had many churches and monasteries. Luther described Eisenach as a "priests' nest and a massive gathering of clerics."²⁵ Luther attended the priests' school associated with St. Georgenkirche (see fig. 1.4). That did not mean, however, that he was enrolled in the training for the priesthood, only that he would receive instruction to prepare him for a higher study. As a student, he would also be engaged in the celebrations of mass. Thus, Luther became involved in the veneration of St. Anna, a popular saint at that time. Her veneration took place especially in the church that Luther attended. Most likely, Luther received accommodation in the house of Heinrich Schalbe, a leading citizen of Eisenach and burgomaster of the city between 1495 and 1499. It is also possible that he was simply a frequent guest, because Schalbe often allowed students to join his family for free meals.²⁶

One of the residents in that house was Ursula Cotta, Heinrich's daughter, and her husband, Kunz Cotta. Whether Luther was received in that house because Ursula had noticed him singing or begging, as was said, is not completely clear. Luther himself recounted that he had to earn money for his studies as *partekenhengst*, a word that is derived from the Latin word *particula*, which means "part," whereas *hengst* means "horse." So Luther had to earn money by going door-to-door and singing, just as a horse neighs for a piece of bread. Though this kind of behavior was looked down on, Luther does not appear to have been ashamed of it.²⁷

In the Schalbe household Luther was exposed to the Franciscan monastery. The most important aspect of Luther's spiritual devotion, though, was his belief that Christ is, more than anything, a Judge:



Figure 1.4 St. Georgenkirche of Eisenach. Photo by CEphoto, Uwe Aranas (CC BY-SA-3.0).

“Ever since my childhood I had gotten used to blanching and becoming frightened whenever I simply heard the name of Christ mentioned. For I had not been taught anything else other than that I had to see him as a strict and wrathful Judge.”²⁸ This attitude also appears from one of the stories Luther told to make the message of the gospel clear:

Christ offers himself to us with the forgiveness of sins, and nevertheless, we still flee from his face. That’s the way it was when, as a boy still living at home, we went out to sing songs to collect sausages. Once someone called out to us with a joke: “What are you

doing there, you rascals? Just you wait a moment!” And at the same time, he approached us with two sausages. But my friends and I fled and ran away from him who came to us with a gift. In exactly the same manner it is with us before God. He grants us Christ with all his gifts, and yet we flee away from him and see him as our Judge.²⁹

The question that haunted so many people in Luther’s day, young and old alike, was whether they could do enough good to outweigh their sins and thus be acceptable to God:

Therefore, it is scandalous that men under the papacy taught people to flee from Christ. I preferred that his name would not be mentioned within my hearing because they had instructed me in such a manner that I had to provide satisfaction for my sins and that on the last day Christ would say, “How well did you keep the Ten Commandments? What’s your condition?” Whenever someone described him to me, I was terrified of him, just like I was of the Devil, because I could not bear his judgment.³⁰

This terror made the sale of indulgences successful. To help people deal with temptations, special booklets were developed, meant primarily for clerics, to provide dying people with as much surety as possible. In Latin these booklets were called *ars moriendi*, literally, “the art of dying well.” Since most people could not read, these books contained pictures, which illustrated what Satan would try to do to make one’s deathbed a horror. The spirituality of Luther’s culture was almost completely about awareness of sin and guilt, and ghastly images like these functioned to instill fear in spiritually dull people. In this context, Luther recounted that even as a child he knew that playing cards and dancing were sins and that one would have to confess these sins if he or she had hope of life after death.³¹

The Middle Ages may not have been as dark as they have often been portrayed, but from a spiritual perspective, the world in which young Martin Luther grew up was more like a haunted house than a playground.

"Among the many new biographies of Martin Luther, this one stands out for its fresh engagement with Luther's own assessment of his life and work. Well researched and engagingly presented."

TIMOTHY GEORGE, founding dean, Beeson Divinity School; general editor, Reformation Commentary on Scripture

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