

# MARTIN LUTHER

A Late  
Medieval Life

VOLKER LEPPIN

TRANSLATED BY RHYS BEZZANT AND KAREN ROE



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## FOREWORD

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**A**nniversaries with round numbers often elicit biographies and other scholarly studies. Thus, 2017 becomes an excellent time for readers to reacquaint themselves with the life and thought of Martin Luther (1483–1546), whose 95 Theses were first distributed and printed five hundred years ago. Some of the works produced for the five hundredth anniversary will doubtless simply rework the familiar contours of Luther's life and the origins of the German Reformation. Others may inadvertently import our own culture's favorite tropes into the distant past—either to praise or to excoriate the Augustinian friar from Wittenberg. By contrast, readers of this new biography by Volker Leppin will receive a compact summary of Luther's biography based on the very latest and best scholarship. In addition, this book avoids the temptation to modernize Luther and instead carefully leads readers into the world of sixteenth-century central Europe so that Luther may be appreciated in the light of his own time, not ours.

The author, Volker Leppin, is unfortunately not yet well known to the English-speaking world, but his training and scholarship recommend him highly. He began his academic life at the University of Heidelberg, where, under the tutelage of Gottfried Seebass,

he wrote his dissertation on William of Ockham<sup>1</sup> and wrote his habilitation on Lutheran pamphlet literature from 1548 to 1618 (that is, the period between the Schmalkaldic War and the Thirty-Years' War).<sup>2</sup> After a brief stint in Frankfurt, he became professor of church history at the University of Jena (2000–2010) before being called as professor of church history in the Protestant faculty of theology at the University of Tübingen, where, as the successor to Ulrich Köpf and Heiko Oberman, he also directs the Institute for the Late Middle Ages and Reformation. His vast publications and his work with other scholars in Germany, especially focused on the Middle Ages and the Reformation, have made him one of the most important church historians in Germany today and one of the best among a new generation of German academicians.

A sampling of his considerable literary production over the years provides a good sketch of his wide-ranging interests in church history. He has a deep commitment to providing primary literature to German readers. Thus, in 2000 he produced with Sigrid Müller a German translation of excerpts from William of Ockham; in 2001, with Adolf Martin Ritter and Bernhard Lohse, he produced a broader set of medieval sources; and in 2005 he wrote a similar volume on the Reformation.<sup>3</sup> He also has written helpful introductions to the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and Thomas Aquinas, as well as an overview of the history of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> In

1. Published as *Geglaubte Wahrheit: Das Theologieverständnis Wilhelms von Ockham* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995).

2. Published as *Antichrist und Jüngster Tag: Das Profil apokalyptischer Flugschriftenpublizistik im deutschen Luthertum, 1548–1618* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999).

3. *Wilhelm von Ockham, Texte zur Theologie und Ethik, ausgewählt und übersetzt* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000); *Mittelalter: Bearbeitet und übersetzt* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001); *Reformation: Ausgewählt und kommentiert* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005). In 2008 he also published the Latin original and a German translation of William of Ockham's *De connexione virtutum / Über die Verknüpfung der Tugenden* (Freiburg: Herder, 2008).

4. *Theologie im Mittelalter* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2007); *Geschichte des mittelalterlichen Christentums* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); *Das Zeitalter der Reformation: Eine Welt im Übergang* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft,

addition, Leppin has written several important studies on the role of mysticism in the Middle Ages and beyond.<sup>5</sup> His collaboration with other scholars has helped bring a host of medieval and Reformation essays into print, including a collection of essays on Martin Luther's monastic career.<sup>6</sup> Most recently, he produced a volume on the relation of theology and church politics in the Late Middle Ages and Reformation.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps his most notable work is his larger biography of Martin Luther.<sup>8</sup> Out of research for that book the present, smaller work emerged.

The care with which he has conducted research over the years and the insights that he brings to the study of the Reformation and its origins aptly reflect the work of the late Gottfried Seebass (a scholar known for his work on the Lutheran reformer Andreas Osiander and on the Anabaptist movement in the sixteenth century). This biography also echoes the work of Heiko Oberman, who is most famous in the English-speaking world for his study of Gabriel Biel (*The Harvest of Medieval Theology*) and his provocative biography of Luther (*Luther: Man between God and the Devil*). In these pages as well, the reader will discover a Martin Luther firmly grounded in late medieval life and thought, with special emphasis given to Luther's debt to the German mysticism

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2009); *Thomas von Aquin* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2009); *Geschichte der christlichen Kirchen* (Munich: Beck, 2010).

5. *Die christliche Mystik* (Munich: Beck, 2007) and, most recently, *Die fremde Reformation* (Munich: Beck, 2016). With Berndt Hamm, he published a set of essays entitled *Gottes Nähe unmittelbar erfahren: Mystik im Mittelalter und bei Martin Luther* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). This interest is also reflected in a collection of his essays, *Transformationen: Studien zu den Wandlungsprozessen in Theologie und Frömmigkeit zwischen Spätmittelalter und Reformation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

6. Edited with Christoph Bultmann and Andreas Lindner, *Martin Luther und das monastische Erbe* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

7. *Reformatorsche Gestaltungen: Theologie und Kirchenpolitik in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016). This book reflects some of his interests already expressed in his *Die Wittenberger Reformation und der Prozess der Transformation kultureller zu institutionellen Polaritäten* (Stuttgart: Hirzel, 2008).

8. *Martin Luther*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010).

of Johannes Tauler and of the head of Luther's own Augustinian order in Germany, Johann von Staupitz. By placing Luther squarely within his late medieval milieu, Leppin allows the reader to uncover both continuity with the intellectual movements of the late Middle Ages and unique aspects of Luther's theology.

For one example of the skill with which he tells Luther's life story, consider how Leppin expresses a particularly trenchant aspect of Luther's theological development by employing the spellings of the reformer's name that Luther himself used. Well into his thirties, Martin Luther was actually Martin Luder, as his family spelled and doubtless pronounced it. But then in 1517, Luther consciously Hellenized his name based upon the Greek *eleutherios*, "the free one." Besides conforming to the practice of many humanists of the day (including Philipp Melancthon, whose Greek surname translates Schwartzertdt, "black earth"; and Johannes Oecolampadius, Greek for Huszgen, later Hausschein, "house light"), Luther expressly chose this spelling to reflect the center of his own theology, as he came increasingly to emphasize the freedom of a Christian justified before God simply by grace through faith on account of Christ.

Leppin's chief contribution to our understanding of Luther stems from his careful distinguishing of Luther's later accounts of early events in his life from earlier accounts, especially given the influence of the later accounts in relating Luther's life story. Leppin meticulously separates Luther's decision to turn from the study of law and instead to enter the monastery from the famous story of his distress in a thunderstorm and his cries to St. Anne. Leppin places the decision instead within the growing tensions between a successful father and a strong-willed son. Leppin also rightly dismisses Luther's later criticisms of his own life as an Augustinian friar and instead shows just how obedient and successful Luther was as he moved from novice and student of theology to professor at the University of Wittenberg and provincial vicar within his order. Leppin also uses the new dating of

Luther's journey to Rome to underscore Luther's commitment to the reform undertaken by Staupitz. But underneath these and similar gentle corrections, Leppin introduces a crucial correction to most views of Luther: he was continuously wracked by spiritual struggles, searching in vain for a gracious God. Leppin thus demythologizes the standard view of Luther—invariably the stuff of movies and other fictionalized accounts of Luther's life—and places him squarely in his own time.

The reader will also encounter the young Luther as a highly educated, careful scholar, whose interest in biblical theology (already before he began his lectures on the Psalter in 1513 as a newly minted doctor of theology) and in the most recent biblical scholarship marked the cutting edge of his theological investigations. When Leppin turns to the highly debated question of Luther's so-called theological breakthrough, he rejects both an early and a late dating by challenging the whole notion of a breakthrough as conceived by twentieth-century scholars who were dependent upon Luther's own later retelling of his early career. Grounding his approach to Scripture on the *pro me*, a way of reading that highlighted the existential and personal, Luther had much in common with earlier writers such as Johannes Tauler or Bernard of Clairvaux and, above all, with his mentor and father confessor, Staupitz. But Luther was among the first to bring such concerns into the classroom of the medieval university.

Leppin's inviting narrative does not overemphasize the early Luther but invites the reader to consider Luther's transformation from professor to prophet to ecclesiast, leading up to the remarkable events of 1525, when Luther's understanding of and support for governmental authority and his commitment to Wittenberg's gospel experienced their deepest testing. A fine, brief description of Luther's writings for the Peasants' Revolt of that year helps explain Luther's position without defending it but by grounding it in his earlier writings on the subject of secular authority. But 1525 was also the year of Luther's marriage and his conclusive refutation of



Erasmus of Rotterdam's defense of free will. For Leppin it marks both the high point of Luther's influence and the beginnings of a new phase of the Reformation, in which others—princes and theologians—would increasingly influence its outcome.

Leppin treats the reader to a compelling sketch of the change of Luther's role in reform as Luther supports the Saxon elector's visitation of churches that began in 1527 by publishing the catechisms in 1529, as he fights with the Swiss and others from 1526 to 1529 over the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, and as the Saxon princes and others confess the evangelical faith in Augsburg in 1530, doing so on the basis of a document drafted by Philipp Melancthon. In the end, Luther had to return to his sharp pen to attack known enemies but acceded to his colleague's ability to walk more softly in Augsburg, despite some strains in their relationship throughout the summer. This careful assessment more accurately depicts Luther's unpredictable role in the ecclesiastical and political developments of 1530 and beyond, as he dealt in turn with rapprochement with South German cities on the Eucharist, with the papal call for a church council, and with the bigamy of Landgrave Philipp of Hesse.

The end of the biography consists of a charitable description of Luther's later life. In his old age, Luther continued to work not only as professor (as from the beginning) but also as an ordaining bishop, a sharp disputant (including answering a new challenge from antinomians), and a sensitive translator. Luther managed to combine a fierce sense of living in the end times with concern for the continued existence of Wittenberg's reform movement. By the very end, however, Luther's life was marred by controversies, some of which (especially his attacks on the Jews) were of his own making. Leppin is careful not to downplay such regretful aspects of Luther's biography. He also takes care not to end his story strictly with Luther's death but rather with the "monumentalization" (to use Leppin's word for it) of Luther's career. Perhaps the best contribution that this biography makes comes in its assiduous

avoidance of hero worship. Leppin's warning at the end of this fine book contains perhaps the best guideline for the five hundredth anniversary: "Putting someone on a pedestal and making them a still life are not very different in their consequences." What Leppin offers in the end is an approachable, human Luther, whose life and work had remarkable influence during his lifetime and down to the present and who even in death continues to defy attempts to fix him or his work in the concrete of our own most beloved legends.

Timothy J. Wengert  
Eve of All Saints' Day, 2016

## TRANSLATORS' INTRODUCTION

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With cultural memory failing fast, it is important to produce—or even in translation to reproduce—biographies of great figures from religious history. It has been a joy for both Karen and me to translate this work by Volker Leppin, one of two biographies of Luther by the author in German. The German original of this book is based on an earlier version that is much longer, containing more quotations and expanded explanations. Our approach has been to render the original in readable English, which has sometimes meant adding words where a concept is assumed in the original or creating new paragraph breaks where the original has lengthy paragraphs. Where a quotation is not available in English, because the original document is obscure, we have occasionally omitted the quotation and explained the concept instead. Most references to secondary material available only in German have also been omitted since we assume that most readers of this translation have little or no capacity to read German. Wherever possible we have quoted from volumes of the *Luther's Works* series (*LW*) rather than translating a sentence ourselves. When a quotation is provided without any

footnote identifying the source, or when we note that the original appears in the Weimarer Ausgabe, the translation belongs to us.

To produce this translation jointly, we met on the first Friday of each month to work on a chapter, identify particular linguistic patterns in Leppin's German, and find consistent English to render it freshly. My thanks go to Karen for her good graces and expert grammar and to Volker Leppin for his encouragement in the project.

Rhys Bezzant

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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When I attended my first International Congress for Luther Research in 1997 in Heidelberg, “international” only included Luther scholars who spoke German, regardless of their country of origin. Over the last two decades, the situation has changed radically so that today Luther research is truly an international project. This means that we now need scholars who are able to build bridges between different linguistic cultures. I am very grateful to three such scholars. Rhys Bezzant was the *spiritus rector* of this translation, and he and Karen Roe have provided a careful reading of my text so that I feel myself very well understood by this eminently readable English translation. Timothy Wengert encouraged the work, and I was honored to have him write the foreword. It is my duty and pleasure to thank all of them together with the editors at Baker Academic who helped make this book a reality. May it contribute to good connections between Europe and the English-speaking world!

Volker Leppin  
Tübingen, February 2017

# 1

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## The Son

### *Destined for Higher Things*

I confess I'm the son of a peasant from Möhra, near Eisenach, but in spite of this I'm a doctor of the Holy Scriptures and an opponent of the pope."<sup>1</sup> In this one sentence from his *Table Talk*, Martin Luther encapsulates a major theme in his family's history: the narrative of upward social mobility, which both shaped his parents' home and culminated in his own story as an academic and reformer. His grandfather Heine Luder was a successful and influential farmer in Möhra, just a few miles south of Eisenach.<sup>2</sup> His father, Hans, was a miner, which in those days meant geographic and social mobility. This mobility gave Hans the opportunity to meet and woo Margarete Lindemann, who hailed

1. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (hereafter *LW*), vol. 54, *Table Talk*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 282.

2. Martin was descended from the Luder family but in 1517 changed the spelling of his name to the well-known form "Luther." In order to avoid historical anachronism, we shall refer to him as Martin Luder when referring to the man prior to this change and as Martin Luther when referring to the man following this time.

from one of the most prestigious families in Eisenach. Martin's ambitious father had his sights set on moving up in the world, while his mother knew the pleasure of a privileged upbringing. This dynamic mixture of social and economic realities shaped the son who would go on to reform Western Christianity.

Martin Luder was born in Eisleben on November 10, 1483, apparently some time after the death of an older brother (though the details are unclear). He was given the name Martin after the saint of the day on which he was baptized, November 11, as was common practice. Not long after, his family moved to Mansfeld so Hans could work in a flourishing copper mine. Despite some challenges, Hans became a successful small-scale entrepreneur and was able to lease a mining workshop. Although we have only sparse references to Martin's childhood in this hard-working and frugal home, he remembers experiencing conflict with his parents. Later in life he recalled, "My father once whipped me so severely that I ran away from him, and he was worried that he might not win me back again."<sup>3</sup> His father regretted punishing his son so strictly, though we know little more about this incident.

Reports concerning Martin's religious upbringing are similarly sparse. We know that when he was a young boy his mother would often sing a song to him about human failings and ensuing guilt, which reveals something of the gloomy nature of her faith. Martin later recollects how his parents gave him a basic catechetical education and inadvertently fostered in him an anticlerical spirit. Moreover, within the polarizing views of God in late medieval piety—with the tender and loving God of the mystics on the one hand and the distant and terrifying image of God in traditional religion on the other—the Luder family clearly leaned toward the latter. From his earliest days, Martin feared what he understood to be the ever-present power of the devil, whom he saw as his opponent for the remainder of his life. Even his view of Christ was

3. Luther, *Table Talk*, 157.

colored with overtones of fearful expectation. He found it difficult to shake early childhood impressions, for he had been taught to expect a terrifying encounter with Christ at the last judgment. This expectation tormented him until he found some measure of release from these fears with the help of his spiritual director in the monastery.

More important for Martin in the development of his reforming ways was the excellent education that his father made possible, no doubt in the hope of further social advance. Martin began attending school in his hometown of Mansfeld on March 12, 1491. The lessons were conducted in Latin, and the main content was the so-called trivium, consisting of logic, grammar, and rhetoric. The school also offered basic religious instruction in the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed, but limited educational possibilities in small-town Mansfeld were apparently disappointing for his ambitious parents, so they sought suggestions from family friends for the next stage of his education. Consequently, in 1497 Martin started at the cathedral school in Magdeburg. Here he lived in community with the Brethren of the Common Life, known as the Null-Brothers, where he experienced a meditative and holistic monastic way of life. This group belonged to a late medieval movement known as the *devotio moderna*. In more ways than one, life in Magdeburg opened up a new world for Martin as this young country boy experienced city life for the first time. A year later, however, he changed schools once again, this time to one in Eisenach. The reasons for this latest change are not as clear, but it can be assumed that closeness to extended family may have been a factor.

Life in Eisenach presented Martin with opportunities for new friendships and experiences. Through his landlord, Heinrich Schalbe, he not only was offered a bursary for study but also came into contact with the local Franciscans, toward whom he then and for many years afterward felt such warmth. Nicknamed "The College of Schalbe," they were primarily interested in matters of the individual's soul and spirit. Moreover, while attending St.



George's School in Eisenach, Martin was significantly influenced by Johannes Braun, vicar of St. Mary's Abbey, whose humanist ideals were powerfully formative for him.

After fulfilling the demanding requirements of his secondary education, Martin began further study in Erfurt in the summer of 1501. University education in this era typically began with studies in philosophy in the arts faculty, which in Erfurt followed the scholastic logic of Aristotle. Only when these foundational studies had been completed could a student be admitted to one of the higher faculties of law, medicine, or theology. Martin's teachers, Jodokus Trutvetter and Bartholomäus Arnoldi of Usingen, lectured according to the *via moderna* syllabus, which held that any system of universals exists only conceptually, or nominally, and so was sometimes known as nominalism or terminism. This theory differed from the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, which defended the existence of universals and was sometimes known as realism or the *via antiqua*. In Erfurt the modern philosophical way was taught, according to the principles of William of Ockham. Luther later declared that he belonged to the terminists and that Ockham had been his teacher.

Martin's education in Erfurt wasn't just about his classes. Living in the St. George's student hostel helped deepen his knowledge of humanism—a term referring both to a modern pedagogy and to a syllabus oriented toward a philological approach to the study of humanities. This “new” humanist approach to knowledge provided a popular alternative to the dominant and dry Scholasticism of the day, and Martin clearly enjoyed pursuing an agenda that opposed the university syllabus. Perhaps it is not surprising that, before entering the monastery in Erfurt, he returned all of his university texts to the bookseller except for his copies of Plautus and Virgil, the latter of which was highly regarded in humanist circles as the definitive guide to antiquity after Dante.

During this time, Martin also demonstrated his skill as a musician, revealing what a well-rounded individual he had become. The

circumstances surrounding his decision to take up music followed an almost fatal accident. While traveling on one occasion to see his parents, Martin inadvertently stabbed himself in the leg with his own dagger and very nearly bled to death—his first near-death experience. He took up the lute during his period of convalescence.

In 1505 he graduated with a master of arts, and by this time he considered himself to have broken free from the university's scholastic agenda through his liberating studies of humanism. His degree was the ticket he needed to enroll in one of the higher faculties, and according to his father's wishes, he chose to study law.