Introduction

The Importance of Luther in Context

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My sophomore year of college was the first time I read anything that might properly be called a theological classic. It was in an introduction to philosophy class, and we read the proofs for the existence of God in Thomas Aquinas and Anselm and then parts of *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm's explication of the Incarnation and the Atonement. I was taught then, as generations of students before me had been taught, that the way to truly understand Anselm was to understand his feudal context. According to this line of thinking – made popular in the nineteenth century by Adolf von Harnack – Anselm's understanding of the atonement was based on the medieval system of feudalism. Anselm took his concepts of justice, honor, and obedience directly from the feudal world around him and interpreted Christ's incarnation and atonement through that worldview. Imagine my surprise years later when, as a graduate student, I happened upon an article written in 1974 by a prominent medieval historian who argued that the idea of "feudalism" as "system" was largely a historical construct – and a lazy one at that.[1] There were aspects of it, certainly, but a system or a systematic worldview, Elizabeth A. R. Brown argued, did not exist. What does this mean for the view of Anselm I had been taught? Only in the last two decades have historians of theology begun to grapple with the import of Brown. But the generations-long adherence to Anselm and his feudal worldview ought to serve as both a warning and a challenge to us.

The warning is to be wary of received interpretations, for not every long-standing perspective ought to be maintained. At that same time, we must be

[1] See Brown, "The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe," *American Historical Review* 79, no. 4 (October 1974): 1063–1088.

challenged again and again to return to the sources, to return to the context in which a document was written, in order to understand it best. Researchers must especially consider this caution and challenge when looking at Martin Luther. Almost from the moment that he posted his *Ninety-Five Theses*, interpretations of his work and legacy have been contested. Far too often, he has been cast as either a great hero or a great villain. Whether hero or villain, the man Luther – the person who actually lived, ate, slept, argued, and wrote with passion and brilliance but could also be mean-spirited and vindictive – disappears. Too often his admirers have passed over in silence the less laudatory aspects of his life and legacy, while his detractors have often had only an eye for those aspects. It is the hope of this volume that by better understanding Luther's context, the world in which he lived and worked and wrote and prayed, one will come to see Luther in a clearer light so that a more realistic portrait of the man and his significance can then emerge.

Take, for example, one of the great heroic representations of Martin Luther: his so-called rediscovery of the Gospel. According to the telling of this story, which sometimes takes place in his study and at other times in the bathroom of the castle tower, Luther alone with his thoughts of Augustine and Paul rediscovered that human beings are saved from damnation by grace alone, not through the intercession of the saints or the storehouse of merit, and not through penance or indulgences. When Luther read Romans 1:17 – "for the righteous shall live by faith" – Paul and Augustine crashed together in his mind through the power of the Holy Spirit, and he discovered that righteousness is a free gift from God, not a thing to be earned. Salvation is a gift to be received, not something to be achieved through works.

Nearly thirty years after the *Ninety-Five Theses*, in a preface to his Latin writings, Luther first told that story, proving perhaps that even he had begun to frame his work in a heroic fashion. But did it actually happen like that? By delving deeply into Luther's early works and examining the context out of which the *Ninety-Five Theses* emerged, a different story slowly develops. By looking in detail at Luther's context, one begins to notice how very much he was influenced by Augustine and Paul, yes, but also by two humanists and bible scholars: the Parisian Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and the Dutchman Desiderius Erasmus. Luther used bible commentaries written by both men as he prepared lectures for his work as a college professor. Between 1513 and 1517, he read about things like justification by faith alone (a phrase first used by Lefèvre, not Luther), the imputation of righteousness (Lefèvre and Erasmus), and repentance (Erasmus). He went beyond both Lefèvre and Erasmus in interpretation of those ideas and brought into the discussion things he was reading in Augustine and Paul. One thing is

fairly clear: the image of the solitary Luther in his study ruminating on Paul and Augustine disappears when one better understands the context out of which Luther emerged.

That is the point of this volume, to help the reader understand Luther's context and thereby understand him better. This volume is broken into seven major sections. It begins with Luther's life and education. It includes a section on his wife and partner in much of the second half of his life, Katharina von Bora. Her influence has only in the last generation been truly acknowledged and appreciated, but it was significant and important to who Luther was and what he did from 1525 to his death in 1545. It also includes sections on his education and the importance of his time as an Augustinian friar. The second section explores the religious and intellectual world of the Late Medieval Period. Here again, one will begin to see that Luther was part of a series of reform movements during the late-medieval era. His certainly had the largest and longest impact, but it was not the only one, nor was it the only one to have a lasting effect. The section on Luther's social and cultural context is the longest in the book. It has been said that one of the reasons Luther was successful was that he came out of the Holy Roman Empire. Had he lived elsewhere, he might not have been as successful. But this conjecture fails to appreciate that Jan Hus, burned at the Council of Constance in 1415, was also from within the Empire, so while geography certainly mattered, it might not be considered determinative. Could his success have depended on other things? The power of the printing press, perhaps? Or perhaps it was the power of the visual image? The answer to these questions and others will have to be answered by you, the reader, but it is hoped that the essays included here will help you on that journey. The fourth section is, in many ways, a continuation of the social and cultural context, but here the focus is on the people with whom Luther lived, worked, fought, or otherwise engaged or had an impact on his life. Included here are his supporters and his detractors. Both groups affected him.

The final sections turn more directly to Luther. Luther is best described as a contextual theologian rather than a systematic theologian. A systematic theologian, whether Thomas Aquinas or John Calvin, aims at comprehensiveness and cohesion. A contextual theologian, like Luther, is more focused on the question at hand and seeks to give what he or she believes to be the best theological answer or understanding for that particular moment in time or concern. While this sometimes means they can write something they later contradict, that does not mean contextual theologians do not have discernible and persistent theological commitments. The first of the Luther-focused sections concentrates on some of these core themes in Luther's works.

The second section focuses on genre. When seeking to understand a writer, genre is always important. A private letter and a public letter are both letters, but they are not exactly the same genre. One would never confuse, for example, a love letter written to Coretta Scott King with Martin Luther King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, for example. The same is true for his namesake. This section seeks to explain and help one distinguish Luther's well-known and widely-published theological treatises or polemics from, say, his sermons preached in Wittenberg's community church. It also has a chapter on Luther's work as a bible translator and chapters on the authoritative editions of his work in Latin and German and then in English. The final section turns to the question of Luther's reception. How did others around him use and develop his work? Or did they repudiate it and him? Chapters here focus on the Anabaptists, Calvinists, and the English Reformation. Finally, how did his own direct followers attempt to continue, honor, and edify his legacy?

The volume is, of course, not exhaustive, but we have aimed for as much breadth as possible. It is meant as a tool to be used, a starting point for further work. Each chapter has a short bibliography of recommended works that the student of Luther can turn to for more in-depth analysis of the topic at hand.

Finally, I would like to take a moment of personal privilege to thank those who helped make this possible. James Nogalski and Beth Allison Barr, Directors of Graduate Studies in Religion and History at Baylor, supported graduate student stipends. This book would not have happened without those graduate students: Lynneth Miller, Scott Prather, and Joshua Smith. Scott, especially, helped guide this from beginning to end. I thank them all.