Introduction

The Importance of Luther in Context

David M. Whitford

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.

PART I

LIFE AND EDUCATION

1

Luther

A Life of Successful Struggle

Adam L. Wirrig

Engaging the life of Martin Luther is a difficult venture on many levels. Luther was both the uncanny titan of the early Protestant Reformation and yet also a very human man. Luther's was a life of normal human existence punctuated by unforeseen and often unbelievable greatness. To say the least, Martin Luther's was a life that is difficult to qualify in some succinct manner.

Much has been written about Luther in the 500-plus years since his birth. Such writings have included the good, the bad, and the proverbial ugly about the reformer's life. To attempt to add to these already written and often monumental biographies is a fearsome prospect for any scholar. That all of these ventures struggle against the realities of constructing a life out of historic sources that are often polemic, hagiographic, and/or simply unavailable makes a scholarly engagement with the life of Luther something that is not for the faint of heart. Though these realities weigh heavily on any engagement and examination of the life of Martin Luther, they do not ultimately make such a venture impossible. Instead, with boundaries and limitations firmly sighted, one might ponder the life of Luther in a way that holistically examines the good and the bad, the simple and the incredible. From these things, one can begin to see that Luther's life was one that, though incredible in many aspects and not so incredible in others, might be thoroughly contextualised in the narrative of struggle.

To begin, one must remember that the contextualisation of *struggle* need not bring with it a flair for the grandiose or the melodramatic. Certainly, there were instances and periods of Luther's life where such dramatic characterisations might be valid. All the same, one might more accurately surmise that Luther's life was one that occurred during a time of great change and challenge, a time of invention and reinvention. From science

to society, education to entrepreneurship, the world of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries was one in which concepts, governments, and a host of things grew at a drastic pace, the new replacing the old (Dixon and Scribner, 36–43). Thus Luther, along with the rest of society at the time, lived in an almost perpetual state of struggle, challenge, and adaptation.

Such a narrative finds its first relevance not in the adult life of Luther, or even in his childhood, but instead in the fortunes of his family prior to his birth. Luther's father, Hans, was from what the modern world might term a "middle-class" farming family. Hans's family wasn't wealthy by any means, but it was in a relatively stable position for the time and locale. Hans, however, due to inheritance laws in his hometown of Möhra, was prevented from inheriting any land from the family estate (Kittelson, 32). This drastically limited the scope of Hans's future and any family he might have were he to stay in the area. In some ways, Hans's situation was helped by his choice of a wife. Margaret Luther, née Lindemann, was from an established family whose members included burghers and the highly educated (Oberman, 89–90). Thus with his prospects in Möhra limited and Margaret's family having relatively decent social connections, Hans and Margaret made the almost eighty-mile journey to Eisleben, where Margaret's eldest brother lived. It was in Eisleben, prefaced by his parents' struggle to get there, that Martin Luther entered the world.

The life of the young Luther suffers from a dearth of resources with which one might engage it. From what is available, one might say that Luther's childhood was one which certainly knew struggle, mostly due to his parents' search for establishment and stability within the world. One might readily say that Hans and Margaret were stern parents, thrifty spenders, and hard workers. Luther himself would seem to speak to this reality in his later writings, noting both the sternness of his parents and also his happiness with his childhood and all the things learned from and through it. Scant resources aside, were one to contextualise the young Luther with what is available, it could be said that he was a sensitive boy struggling to please his strong-willed parents and yet living in a time and place where stability and pleasure were not always of common resource (Oberman, 91–92, 110).

While the life of the very young Luther might suffer from a lack of citation and sources with which to corroborate it, the youthful Luther is an entirely different story. Luther's youth is adequately summed up through the exercise of schooling. Formal education was a long-held tradition in Margaret Luther's family, and Hans Luther was equally adamant that his son be properly educated for Martin's betterment. Thus it was that youthful Martin found himself enrolled in a number of schools during this period. In these

schools, from Mansfeld to Magdeburg and finally to Eisenach, young Martin learned the classic trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. In addition, there is evidence that he was schooled in the ways of the *Devotio Moderna* whilst at Magdeburg (Oberman, 96). Though his stay at Magdeburg was relatively brief, this training was undoubtedly influential on the later life of Martin Luther. In this time, it seems that Luther struggled with both the art of schooling and the finer points of what he was learning. In fact, there are evidences to point towards his being a difficult and perhaps unremarkable pupil at the beginning of his school years (Brecht, 12–15). Nonetheless, this personal distaste – or perhaps simply the iron will of his father – did not keep Luther from finishing his primary education in 1501. Upon completion of his studies, Luther enrolled at the University of Erfurt, where he went on to become a talented pupil. Luther's schooling, at this point, was very much driven by the will of his father. Hans Luther, as mentioned previously, had struggled to establish himself both economically and socially. Though by this time a well-to-do copper miner, Hans desired that his children not experience the same travails as he and Margaret had on their road to stability. Thus Hans strongly insisted that Martin study law at Erfurt, with the hopes of his son experiencing the opportunities and benefits afforded to a barrister of the time. Martin, perhaps begrudgingly, went along with his father's insistence and completed the baccalaureate and master's requirements of the time. In these studies, Luther was exposed to mathematics, philosophy, theology, and even music – all of which were meant to aid him in future specified legal studies (Brecht, 32, 44–45). While Luther might have struggled against his father's will for him at this age, he did not struggle against his studies, graduating second in his class from Erfurt, truly well prepared for future studies in law. However, as with so many of the best preparations, this was simply not what was to be.

The world of pre-Reformation German Christianity was one of complicated arrangements and struggles with uncertainty. On the one hand, a belief in God and the need for God's grace for salvation seemed to be readily accepted in almost all parts of society. On the other hand, such grace, in light of penal substitutionary atonement, was almost impossible fully to achieve. Similarly, the physical church was important to German life as the facilitator of whatever grace might be accrued, but it was also a deeply political institution, largely beholden to the patronage of the powerful (Kittelson, 40–41; Dixon and Scribner, 36; Dixon, 40–42). All of these considerations, amongst others, were manifest in the young man Martin Luther.

The young adult Luther was deeply concerned about theological realities, particularly death, dying, sin, and accountability before God. Luther's struggle

with these issues and his path to the monastery at Erfurt were motivated by two primary experiences. Sometime between late 1503 and early 1504, Luther gravely injured himself with a friend's sword. His clumsy injury only served to intensify the theological fears he had experienced earlier (Whitford, 23–24). Though this incident took place prior to his graduation from the University of Erfurt, it undoubtedly predisposed his response to a further and more famous situation. Though Luther had begun his legal studies in 1505, an early-summer storm was to make a precipitous change to both the life of Martin Luther and the world at large. Returning from a visit to see his parents, Martin was caught unawares by a sudden thunderstorm. With no place to shelter and the elements swirling around him, Luther's theological struggles and his very direct physical concerns prompted him to make the famous statement, "Save me, St. Anne, and I shall become a monk." Certainly, Luther was neither the first person nor the last to make promises to a saint while in the midst of torment. Indeed, one might even speculate that Luther had previously considered abandoning his legal training for the ways of the monastery and theological study. All the same, for whatever reason, in this moment, Luther's fears of death, judgement, and punishment came together to spur the young man from the course he had planned onto a path which would shake the whole of Europe, if not the entire world. In July of 1505, Martin Luther left his legal studies at the University of Erfurt and knocked on the door of the monastery of the Erfurt Augustinian Hermits.

Luther's first year at the monastery was something of an unremarkable one. Martin most likely spent his time learning and refining his practice of monastic habits, as was normal for all novices to do. In approximately 1506, Luther began formal advanced studies in theology at the University of Erfurt and was soon seconded to the University of Wittenberg, where he also served as an instructor of philosophy. Luther's studies in the Bible were standard for the time. Undoubtedly, he would have been greatly exposed to the fourfold method of biblical interpretation, championed by Jean Gerson, Nicholas of Lyra, and Gregory the Great. Additionally, he would have been exposed to the interpretive models of Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great (Muller, 9). All of these methods produced a biblical scholar who was greatly concerned with the interpretation and application of the biblical text. That the Bible was, at this point, being readily and mass produced for the first time in history must have only amplified both the importance of the text to the budding scholar and its reception in society. With his schooling complete and a distinct love apparent for the text, Luther began teaching Bible at the University of Wittenberg in the fall of 1513.

Luther's work in Wittenberg was hardly confined to just academic pursuit. In addition to his teaching and personal studies, Luther was called to preach and teach at the local city church of St. Marien. Beyond this, he would become an established figure in the life of his home monastery. Nonetheless, Luther's seat as a professor of Bible allowed him, as might be imagined, incomparable engagement with the biblical text. This consistent engagement with the text, particularly in the form of the *Glossa Ordinaria* and also in the later translations of Desiderius Erasmus, spawned within Luther a number of questions and critiques regarding the things he saw prevalent within the German church of the early sixteenth century (Whitford, 26; Oberman, 124).

It should be well remembered that at the start of his reforming quest, Martin Luther did not seek to destroy or supplant the church as he knew it. Instead, Luther sought to rectify actions that seemed greatly dissonant with his detailed study of scriptures. The Luther of this period was one who greatly loved and valued both the church and its work within the world; stories during his burgeoning quest for reformation detail a Luther who was entirely – almost naively – wedded to the work and witness of the church proper. Even during his debates with Cardinal Cajetan, one might argue that Luther struggled to balance his love for the church with his love for the text and the insight he had found in his studies (Whitford, 34–36). All of this would greatly change after the rather disastrous events of the Leipzig disputation, the Diet of Worms, and the church's official castigation and excommunication of Martin Luther.

After Luther's break with the Roman hierarchy of the church became unresolvable, things progressed at a rather fast pace. The details of Luther's reformation in Germany and his acts and actions within that process are covered in depth in this and many other writings. Nonetheless, one might note that reformation of the church presented Luther with struggle in places that might otherwise seem unexpected. Certainly, one might expect Luther to have struggled in a very physical sense at this time. Luther was an excommunicated man challenging a very politically indebted German church, upsetting the spiritual moorings for most of Europe, and challenging some of the most powerful leaders in all of the sixteenth century. Bringing the reforming changes that Luther proposed into these realms posed a very real threat to his physical well-being. Luther, in his course of reformation, however, encountered further struggle beyond just the physical realm. It must have become apparent very quickly to Luther that it was one thing to institute a call for change or propagate a new narrative for church and society but a very different thing entirely to perpetuate such ideas. Luther's clarion call for new ways of being and doing "church" was one thing, but