



The Apocalyptic Luther

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“It’s the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.”¹

—R.E.M.

A person hoping to find in Luther some hellfire and brimstone apocalyptic on the order of Daniel or Revelation would be just as well off looking for Luther in the *Left Behind* series or *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Both searches will yield meager results. A quick rummage through *Luther’s Works* reveals little in the way of visionary writing so typical of biblical apocalyptic.

That said, it would also be true to say that popular thinking in Luther’s day included a fascination with the end times equal to our own. Woodcuts were regularly printed across Germany in which a report of a malformed baby or a rain of fish or other objects falling from the heavens served as evidence of the speedy advance of the end of time.² For ordinary Christians across Europe, the late medieval *Totentanzen* and *memento mori* kept the prospect of the last day before their consciences with these woodcuts’ scenes of rotting corpses and skeletons cavorting through the activities of daily life. With waves of the plague advancing from town to town, high infant mortality and, at specific times in some locales, a life expectancy that was hard put to climb over seventeen, people were fully aware of the pos-

¹From the R.E.M. album *Document*, Capitol Records, 1987.

²See Max Geisberg, *The German Single-Leaf Woodcut, 1500–1550*, rev. and ed. Walter L. Strauss, 3 vols. (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1974).

Luther saw the entire plane of human existence as a battleground fought over by God and the devil. The center of this apocalyptic battle lay in pulpit and altar, where the sinner received in word and sacraments the promise of Christ’s salvation, which alone could produce the faith that would thwart the devil’s attacks.

sibility of the end of their own lives coming sooner rather than later. Luther's view of his own age as an apocalyptic era takes place in that context.

With the titles of Marius's and Oberman's Luther biographies as signs of a wider assumption about the topic,³ it has become a commonplace that Martin Luther thought of himself as living at the end of the ages. As James Nestingen has argued, Luther's "recovery of the eschatology of the New Testament, in its apocalyptic form, has to be counted with the theology of the cross as constitutive of his theology."⁴

A MIGHTY FORTRESS

While Luther himself was not an apocalyptic visionary, he still wrote clearly of apocalyptic matters. Nowhere does the apocalyptic Luther appear as vividly than in his best-known hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." It is regarded as the battle hymn of the Reformation for good reason, for it carries the immediacy of a war correspondent's report from the front lines. But far too often, while the hymn is sung with great verve and pride, its singers neglect to consider what the text says. Yet, when Luther's words are translated as prose, without the burden of rhyme schemes and metrical restriction, Luther's apocalyptic picture of a life of faith located between opposing forces becomes clear:

Our God is an unfaltering fortress, a good defense and weapon. He freely helps us out of every adversity that has now affected us. The ancient evil enemy is now deadly serious; his armor is great power and much guile. There is none on earth who can equal him. Nothing can be done by our own power; we're almost completely lost.

Yet a righteous man whom God himself has chosen is fighting for us. Do you want to know who he is? His name is Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath. There is no other who is God. He must carry the field of battle.

And even if the world were full of devils who wanted to wolf us down completely, we wouldn't tremble so badly—we'll manage it. However acidly the prince of this world portrays himself, he can do nothing to us. One tiny word can fell him.

[The devils] have no thanks for the word and have to let it stand. [The word] is fully on our side with his spirit and gifts, according to his plan. If [the devils] were to take the body, goodness, honor, child, and wife, let them go, for they profit us nothing. The kingdom certainly must remain ours.⁵

As close to an apocalyptic vision as this reworking of Ps 46 comes, the hymn still doesn't show Luther doing anything more than painting a vivid picture of

³Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999); Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁴James Nestingen, "The End of the End: The Role of Apocalyptic in the Lutheran Reform," *Word & World* 15/2 (1995) 204.

⁵Martin Luther, "Der xlvi. Psalm," in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883–1980) 35:455–457 (my translation)(hereafter WA).

God's battle with evil and our hope in a champion fighting for us. If the assumption about an apocalyptic Luther is true, it must come from other sources.

THE TURKS AS SERVANTS OF THE DEVIL

The evidence that Luther thought of himself as living in an age in which the battle depicted in his great hymn was raging all around him comes in his view of Suleiman the Magnificent's Turkish armies. Luther had already regarded the papal authorities' rejection of God's word as sign enough of the end times, but the presence of the Turks advancing up the Balkan peninsula certainly had a direct connection to the apocalypse for him.⁶ As Mark U. Edwards has argued, Luther had come to see the Turks as the present-day manifestation of Daniel's "little horn" (Dan 7:8–10) come to wage war and defeat the saints of God, and as the Gog of Ezek 38 and Rev 20.⁷ Luther regarded the invading army of Turks under Suleiman as both God's punishment on the faithless Christians of the empire and "the devil's servant" come to wreak havoc on them.⁸

"Luther regarded the invading army of Turks as 'the devil's servant' come to wreak havoc"

More than a decade later, with the Turks still a thorn in the side of the empire, Luther again argued that the enemies at the gate were a rebuke for the faithlessness of the German people who had now received the gospel.

For many years we Germans have heard the dear word of God,...[but] we, thus, go beyond ourselves and persecute the dear word...so that it wouldn't be a surprise if God allowed or has long allowed the German land to be inundated not just with the Turks but with vain devils, too.⁹

Luther saw his role in the face of such a demonic attack as much like that of one of the biblical prophets facing down the faithless Israelites and bringing the truth to bear in the midst of a similar Babylonian captivity.

Just so, we are the kind of people Moses, Joshua, Elijah and all the other saints were, for we have the same word and spirit of God that they had. And we're the same preachers, servants, and officials of God that they were. Although they were much more glorious than we, they had no higher nor better God than we have.¹⁰

⁶Mark U. Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531–1546* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983) 97. I am in debt for this section to Edwards's foundational work, especially his chapter, "Apocalyptic Expectations," which serves as a primer on this theme in Luther.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Martin Luther, *On War against the Turk* (1529), in *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 46:170 (hereafter *LW*).

⁹Martin Luther, *Admonition to Prayer against the Turks* (1541), in *WA* 51:585–586 (my translation).

¹⁰*WA* 51:599.

Even though Luther in his prophetic mode accused his people of abandoning God's promises and of virtually begging for God's wrath in the form of Suleiman's armies, if those demonic forces were to appear in German lands and slaughter the German people (and it was sure to happen, since the devil was behind the Turks and had given his warriors countless victories), it really would be an inconsequential matter. Such a death would be a small death, a mere footnote, because their own sin, along with Adam's, had already consigned them fully and finally to God's wrathful punishment of eternal death.¹¹

In spite of their unavoidable death at the hands of the devil, Luther said that there remained hope for sinners:

In contrast [to his enemies bringing the judgment of death], Christ our Savior has long ago provided something opposed to this; he has brought and given [it] through his resurrection to all those who believe it, call on him, and crave him.¹²

Not only does the "little word" of Christ fell his opponents in the battle between God and evil, it also brings a resurrection to all who trust their champion's power and promise. It may be "the end of the world as we know it," but sinners who trust Christ are safe in his mercy.

THE APOCALYPTIC BATTLEFIELD IN MICROCOSM

If the apocalyptic age had already dawned and if death at the hands of the enemy was certain, Christ's promised victory was, for Luther, even more sure. Luther was free to step into the fray as what a hymn from centuries later would call a "soldier of the cross." Luther was not a soldier carrying sword, shield, or spurs. But he knew that God's apocalyptic battle with the evil one was not waged solely on the front lines between Suleiman and Emperor Ferdinand's armies. For Luther, there was yet another apocalyptic battlefield whose outcome mattered every bit as much as the physical battle with the Turks. The enemy's weapons here were just as deadly, its tactics as brazen, and its power unrivalled. It was a battlefield on which the bravest quailed while waiting for the good knight's rescue. It was the battlefield of the human will, and it was on sharpening the weapons of the Spirit for engagement on that battlefield that Luther and his fellow reformers focused their work and, in the process, brought about a revolution in the proclamation of the gospel to sinners.

In his famous treatise against Erasmus, Luther likened the will to a mule being fought over by God and the devil:

But a Stronger One comes who overcomes [Satan] and takes us as His spoil...so that we readily will and do what he wills. Thus the human will is placed between

¹¹WA 51:617–618. This contrasts with Luther's words in his funeral sermon for Frederick the Wise, in which he tells the congregation that the elector's death is a trifle for he had already suffered the primary death of the old sinner when he moved to protect the proclamation of the gospel in his lands (*LW* 51:237).

¹²WA 51:619.

the two like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills....If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills.¹³

The human will has as much power to control its own fate as a battlefield has in choosing sides between the opposing armies, or a pawn has in moving across the chessboard. It is a passive object of possession and control by the Lord of all and his opponent, the king of this world.

“all that remains is the stark-naked desire for help and a terrible groaning, but it does not know where to turn for help”

From his own experience of temptation and despair, Luther knew what sort of bloody arena the battle for the human will can be. Human beings are ravaged by the enemy’s forces:

I myself “knew a man” who claimed that he had often suffered these punishments....Yet they were so great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them, no pen could describe them....At such a time God seems terribly angry, and with him the whole creation. At such a time there is no flight, no comfort, within or without, but all things accuse....All that remains is the stark-naked desire for help and a terrible groaning, but it does not know where to turn for help. In this instance the person is stretched out with Christ so that all his bones may be counted, and every corner of the soul is filled with the greatest bitterness, dread, trembling, and sorrow in such a manner that all these last forever.¹⁴

In *Bondage of the Will*, Luther knew how tenuous human existence stretched out between God and the devil is. He was certain that even if salvation were granted, “I should be unable to stand firm and keep hold of it amid so many adversities and perils and so many assaults of demons.”¹⁵

The core matter in this microcosmic apocalyptic, for Luther, was the place of the law and its relationship to the self. Central for Luther was the conscience, that is, a person’s perception of the self both *coram deo* (before God) and *coram hominibus* (in matters of this life).¹⁶ In Luther’s thinking, a person found her identity, his hope and future bound up in the fulfillment of the law’s demands. When one experienced the inability to fulfill those demands, that person’s identity and future were called into question. Thus, the law was a tool used by the devil to sway the human will and capture it for the forces of unfaith. The law was not simply a theological construct but an actual power that apocalyptically attacked both faith and being in

¹³Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), in *LW* 33:65.

¹⁴Martin Luther, *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses* (1518), in *LW* 31:129.

¹⁵*LW* 33:288.

¹⁶For an exquisite rendering of the place of the conscience in Luther’s theology, see Arthur Barnes Holmes, *Conscience as a Soteriological Battlefield: The Concept of Conscientia Operative in Luther’s Galatians Lectures of 1531* (PhD diss., Drew University, Madison, NJ, 1971)(Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1971).

this life. In the face of such powerful weapons being wielded by God's enemies, if the church were to come into the battle with more law it would only light a fire to the battle arena and exacerbate the problem.

THE PROMISE OF CHRIST AS THE END OF THE APOCALYPTIC BATTLE

Luther's Reformation gospel provided a means for him and his fellow evangelical preachers to move into the fray with the certainty that Christ was indeed the champion of sinners who would fight for them and bring them into God's realm. In God's divine promise in Christ, Luther found a new way of thinking about God and of experiencing God's graciousness, a way that was free of demands on those who, like Luther, had found themselves living as battlefield real estate: dead in sin and unable to furnish the good works the law demanded. Luther defined the promise of God by tying it to the image of a last will and testament:

A testament, as everyone knows, is a promise made by one about to die, in which he designates his bequest and appoints his heirs. A testament, therefore, involves first, the death of the testator, and second, the promise of an inheritance and the naming of the heir.¹⁷

Thus, for Luther, the weapon that God uses to defeat the hordes of devils by whom sinners are beset is "one little word," that is, the person of Christ, who says to the sinner,

Behold, O sinful and condemned [person], out of the pure and unmerited love with which I love you, and by the will of the Father of mercies, apart from any merit or desire of yours, I promise you in these words, the forgiveness of all your sins and life everlasting. And you may be absolutely certain of this irrevocable promise of mine, I shall give my body and pour out my blood, confirming this promise by my very death, and leaving you my body and blood as a sign and memorial of this same promise.¹⁸

In a letter written to console a man worried about facing death, Luther alluded to the apocalyptic battle faced by any sinner who takes matters of faith seriously. He told Mark Schardt that the devil will use the images of sin, death, and hell to drive sinners under the reins of the enemy so that they will come to believe that the devil holds sway over them and set their will in the direction he pulls them in.¹⁹ Luther recommended that his correspondent counter those images with that of Christ, who "takes your death upon himself and strangles it so that it may not harm you....In that way Christ, the picture of life and of grace over against the picture of death and sin, is our consolation."²⁰ If the image of a powerful and gracious Christ was what is needed by sinners caught in the killing ground, Luther's hymn, "A

¹⁷Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in *LW* 36:38.

¹⁸*LW* 36:40.

¹⁹Martin Luther, "A Sermon on Preparing to Die" (1519), in *LW* 42:105.

²⁰*LW* 42:104.

Mighty Fortress,” is happy to provide it. The hymn is the exact picture of Christ that sinners need in order to gain faith while caught up in an apocalyptic maelstrom.

For Luther, at this point one could only proclaim God’s promise in the gospel. The graciousness of God in Christ was to be proclaimed in order to push back the devil’s armies from the battlefield and render his weapons harmless (or, to use the image Luther provided in *Bondage of the Will*, to knock the devil off the sinner’s back). The mercy of God must be announced so as to eliminate the proposition that the enemy’s power can ever amount to anything in the face of such a mighty champion. The benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection must be delivered so that “I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.”²¹ But if the gospel were to be announced, it needed to be done without reservation, without turning it into the law, and without turning it into a theological treatise.

PULPIT AND ALTAR IN THE CENTER OF THE APOCALYPTIC BATTLE

The office of preaching, which Philip Melanchthon took up in Article V of the *Augsburg Confession*, was for Luther the location of God’s counteroffensive that sends the powers of evil reeling. In the word and sacrament proclamation of Christ crucified and risen for the sake of sinners, God creates the faith that serves as an ensign flapping in the midst of the battle and serving as a sign that a champion has laid claim to the parcel of creation that is this specific sinner’s will. For Luther, words *about* God could do nothing but spin a person back into the all too welcoming, waiting arms of abstraction, hiddenness, and terror. The public proclaimer was not called to conversation *about* God, which could not bring saving faith. Nothing short of evangelical proclamation could result in saving faith.

It is law and gospel preaching that, for Luther, was the war plan for a militant God seeking to bring victory. It is the full accusation of the cross of Christ as well as its unimpeachable promise of mercy for sinners that brings the battle to its dénouement.

[I]n the New Testament the gospel is preached, which is nothing else but a message in which the Spirit and grace are offered with a view to the remission of sins, which has been obtained for us by Christ crucified; and all this freely, and by the sole mercy of God the Father, whereby favor is shown to us, unworthy as we are and deserving of damnation rather than anything else.²²

If Christ’s mercy snatches a sinner’s will out of the hands of the enemy and if word and sacrament are the places where that mercy is furnished to the despairing, the lost, and the ravaged, then the center of the apocalyptic battle that Luther saw between the empire and the Turks really lay in pulpit and altar.

²¹Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 354 (hereafter *BC*).

²²Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, in *LW* 33:150.

Luther recognized that the devil has a scorched-earth policy toward sinners. The result of the evil one's work in this world could only ever be death. When sinners heard law and gospel proclamation, they could recognize the true impotence of the devil and his minions. They would know that death was the consequence of sin. And they would, thus, be ready to have the good news planted and growing in them. Luther was able to preach God's promise in Christ in such a way that the old sinner is killed and a new person could rise up in faith "to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."²³

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Toward the end of his career, not long before he wrote his *Admonition to Prayer against the Turks*, Luther took the opportunity to look back on the turmoil and work that had taken place in the years since the *Ninety-five Theses*. When the city of Leipzig finally opened to the Wittenberg theology in the spring, Luther was invited to preach in the duke's chapel. His sermon focused on the connection between God's word and the church. For Luther, the purpose of God's word dwelling among humans, that is, for God's promise in Christ to be brought to bear for the sake of sinners, was to reclaim each person lost to the enemy and, thus, to take the entire field in the apocalyptic battle. If a person's will was the territory God sought, Luther preached,

[D]on't you forget the main point here, namely, that God wants to make his dwelling here. Therefore, when the hand is laid upon your head and the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you in the words: "I absolve you from all your sins in the name of Christ," you should take hold of this Word with a sure faith and be strengthened out of the mouth of the preacher.²⁴

In the great battle in which Christ has come to fight, God seeks to secure salvation's advance and, ultimately, encamp on the field of creation, including the patch of torn-up earth that is the sinner's will.

FIXING GOD'S CLAIMING ON SINNERS

The proclamation of God's promises in Christ to sinners had, for Luther, a singular goal: giving sinners a justifying faith that—whatever slings and arrows would be aimed at them by sin, death, and the devil—they would stand firm in life and remain faithful at the time of death. There was, for Luther, no distinction among the various kinds of proclamation of the gospel. Whether in a sermon, the sacraments, or the absolution, the differences amounted to a mere nuancing of forms shaped for a particular situation or need, yet with the same sinners being at-

²³Luther, *Small Catechism*, in *BC*, 360.

²⁴Martin Luther, "Sermon in Castle Pleissenburg, Leipzig" (1539), in *LW* 51:309.

tacked and the same word of God creating faith. Luther and his fellow reformers saw that every opportunity to instill God's word in the hearts of sinners was another advance in God's movement toward the final victory on the last day. For Luther, to encounter people who did not know of Christ's free benefits for them was to see sinners denied the champion who died for them; this was a horror to him personally. As he said in his introduction to the catechism:

Dear God, what misery I beheld! The ordinary person, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about the Christian faith, and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent preachers.²⁵

Pastors and preachers bore a significant burden in this situation. The devil was on the offensive and yet God's people had not been equipped with faith. It was a "serious and salutary" situation.²⁶ The catechisms themselves function as call to the church's public proclaimers to take up their duty as wielders of God's word. They must bring law and gospel in such a way that faith is created and God's claim on sinners holds sway.

The reason we take such care to preach on the catechism frequently is to impress it upon our young people, not in a lofty and learned manner but briefly and very simply, so that it may penetrate deeply into their minds and remain fixed in their memories.²⁷

With the gospel fixed in the very being of sinners, they could remain part of the territory of God's kingdom. Whether the devil came to battle in the shape of a Turkish army, a representative of the pope himself, or a niggling doubt about God's mercy, the sinner would have naught to fear. If a massed army of devils came to take away "the body, goodness, honor, child and wife," there would be nothing to fear. Come what may, apocalypse now or later, sinners would have certainty that God's kingdom would remain theirs forever. The end of the world as they knew it could come, but they would be fine. ⊕

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²⁵Luther, *Small Catechism*, in *BC*, 346.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Martin Luther, "Preface to the Large Catechism" in *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921) 580 (my translation).