

Luther on Peasants and Princes

by ROBERT KOLB

Although the inventor of the modern discipline of history, Leopold von Ranke, established the ideal for his disciples of telling the past “as it really happened,” the writing of history has always included a mixture of facts and interpretation, a mixture of what really happened with what the historians and their patrons wish had happened, a mixture of the past that is beyond our reach with the inventions and fabrications that serve our propaganda purposes. No depiction of a public figure’s position on a subject illustrates this more clearly than the charge that Martin Luther advocated oppression of the “lower classes” in the interests of exalting the power of absolutist princes. No report of events proves that any more clearly than the typical textbook’s retelling of Luther’s involvement with the great German peasant rebellion of 1524–1526. A careful look at the reaction of the Wittenberg reformer to the peasant protests in their several forms and at the larger context of his comments on both the peasantry and governmental officials reveals a different picture. Luther’s concern focused neither on peasants as peasants nor princes as princes but on public order and justice as well as the need for princes and peasants alike to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ.

Luther and the Peasants

Among Luther’s views of social conditions in his time, the most notorious is undoubtedly his stance toward this Peasants Revolt. His earliest Lutheran biographers treated the events of the Revolt quite briefly, affirming Luther’s rejection of the disorder incited by peasant leaders, particularly by Thomas Müntzer.¹ His first biographer, his Roman Catholic opponent, Johann Cochlaeus offered extensive description of peasant rebellions and the sedition of common people in the towns in several areas and criticized Luther both for stirring up the revolt and for his harsh words against the peasantry.² Other

Roman Catholic foes quickly joined Cochlaeus in blaming Luther for the Revolt, charging that his treatise, *The Freedom of the Christian*, and others of his writings, had aroused the peasants to fight for their freedom, and at the same time they claimed that the Revolt spelled the end of the popular support which Luther's Reformation had initially won.

Twentieth-century scholars brought both assertions into doubt. Wilhelm Stolze demonstrated that it is more likely, on the basis of the publication history of Luther's tracts and the treatise by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Institutes of the Christian Prince*, that the learned humanist and not the Wittenberg theologian may have cast sparks that whipped into the flames of the rebellion. The Zurich reformer Leo Jud, as well as Luther's Wittenberg humanist colleague, Georg Spalatin, had translated Erasmus's *Institutes* into German, and it had received a wider distribution in the areas where the Revolt broke out than had Luther's *Freedom of a Christian*.³ More likely yet, given research into the tradition of peasant communities by scholars like Peter Blickle, the tinder of ideas about peasant rights and freedom lay smoldering—and not only within peasant villages but also within urban neighborhoods—before either *the Institutes of the Christian Prince* or *The Freedom of the Christian* appeared in print.⁴ Indeed, if Luther's writings had been responsible, there should have been even more urban unrest (there was indeed some!) in the period than did take place since in 1524 Luther's ideas were probably better known in urban centers than in the countryside. Likewise, the Leipzig church historian Franz Lau provided a careful study of popular support for Luther's cause in towns and countryside after 1525 and documented many cases of pressure from lower social strata for introduction of Luther's reform in the 1530s, 1540s, and beyond.⁵

Since the middle of the nineteenth century some Marxist scholars followed the interpretation of Luther's relationship to the peasants first laid down by Friedrich Engels in his classic *The German Peasant War* (1850).⁶ He elaborated the myth that Luther encouraged and then betrayed the first proletarian revolution, the rebellion of 1524–1526. This myth served to give a pseudo-historical basis for the Marxist plans for and dogma of revolution. It also helped intensify Marx's vendetta against one of the ecclesiastical establishments of

his homeland, in fact one from which he sprang, the German Evangelical church. Engel's retelling of this story also reshaped the traditional picture of Luther's former student, turned sharp, spiritualist critic, Thomas Müntzer, into a caricature of the man. In addition, Marxist historians squeezed their descriptions of the actual social conditions of the time as well as the theological dimensions of Luther's critique of the peasants into their ideologically-determined analytical categories. This point of view continued to dominate Marxist historical interpretation, for example, in the writings of August Bebel and Karl Kautsky,⁷ until after World War II. Then the Soviet historian M. M. Smirin developed a new interpretation of Luther and the peasants. Luther had not appeared on the stage of world history at the right time to betray the proletarian revolution; he had instead been a positive figure in the unfolding of the proletarian march toward the workers' paradise by aiding the early bourgeois revolution, a necessary precursor and preparation for the proletarian revolution to come.⁸ Smirin's interpretation was taken up by the Leipzig historian Max Steinmetz,⁹ who responded positively to a personal approach by the Lutheran church historian Siegfried Bräuer. Along with that of other church historians in the German Democratic Republic, Bräuer's research into Müntzer laid foundations for a more accurate picture of his disinterest in the peasants and his spiritualistic religiosity.¹⁰

Luther's stance toward the peasants in 1525 also fed other myths that misrepresented what he really said and did. Enlightenment interpretations of Luther had often heralded him as the harbinger of concepts of personal freedom of which he had no inkling and which he would have rejected if he had been able to grasp them.¹¹ But out of the Enlightened tradition also developed by the twentieth century the idea that Luther was a "toady of princes," a stooge in the service of early modern absolutist monarchs, whose support he bought by sacrificing his concern for the lowly. That stream of thinking served British, French, and American propaganda efforts against Germany in World Wars I and II. It reached its low point in the biography of Hitler composed by American journalist William Shirer.¹² More serious studies of Luther's relationship to the princes by a number of scholars, including British church historian W. D. J. Cargill Thompson¹³

and Canadian Reformation historian James J. Estes,¹⁴ have revealed a very different picture on the basis of the sources. The abiding significance and twentieth-century impact of Luther's arguments for the right of "lower magistrates" to offer armed resistance to the emperor¹⁵ has been expounded by German-American scholar Uwe Siemon-Netto.¹⁶

Too often ignored in sketching the background of Luther's public comments on the peasant revolts is the fact that Luther resembled many of his contemporaries (and not only those charged with responsibilities of leadership in Germany in the first quarter of the sixteenth century) who had a profound fear of disorder in society. Social historians have found records of thirty-four such rebellions between 1509 and 1517, most of them local, but all of them posing a threat to public order and safety. One hundred and twelve more in the short span between 1521 and 1523 have been documented.¹⁷ Peasant use of violence in behalf of their claims entailed a clear threat to public peace and stability. Already in his student days at the University of Erfurt Luther had been confronted by violence from the populace. Power plays between the city's artisans and patricians, combining with the rivalry of its overlord, the archbishop of Mainz, and its neighbor, the electorate of Saxony, produced death and destruction among citizens and students in 1509-1510. Luther recalled a spiritual crisis which brought him to seek the counsel of his mentor, Johann Staupitz, when the suffering caused by the riots provoked questions about God's justice and control of human history in his mind.¹⁸ Luther had experienced the breakdown of public order in Wittenberg in 1521 when his colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt fomented unrest in the streets in behalf of reform.¹⁹ Such public disobedience came from Satan's efforts to discredit the Reformation as the Last Day approached, Luther was convinced.²⁰ After the Peasants Revolt he told students at his table that the Revolt had indeed hindered the progress of reform, without giving any specific details.²¹

Most twenty-first century readers of accounts of sixteenth century society approach the topic with a narrowly-focused definition of the "peasantry," which reflects the practices of serfdom in various parts of Europe, particularly in eighteenth-century France, the setting of the Revolution. The German *Bauernschaft* of the sixteenth century

did include day laborers, who had equally impoverished urban artisans at their side in some peasant revolts. But the peasantry also embraced relatively prosperous, land-holding farmers, just as among the artisans of the towns were numbered some whose economic condition was far from impoverished.²² Luther's own background in the world of the peasants ought not be exaggerated. His father had grown up in a peasant home, probably a relatively prosperous peasant home, son of a village leader, as Luther once recounted to students at table,²³ and Luther visited his relatives in the countryside from time to time. He himself grew up among mining peasants, that is, for the most part probably also people who had left agriculture for the mines and smelters of Mansfeld. Therefore, he had little reason to view the peasants of his day as particularly destitute. He did not automatically count them among the economically poor or socially disadvantaged. Interestingly, in other areas of Germany, particularly to the northeast, the economic and social conditions of the peasantry were worse than in Saxony, but little armed protest took place there. Viewed from Luther's experience and perspective, conditions were different for the peasantry in his region of Germany than they became, for instance, in late eighteenth-century France. He had some appreciation for peasant life, but he may well have had the sense of distance from the soil that often accompanies the social mobility which raises a family one step, into smelting, and another step, to the level of the university professor.

Luther's comments on the peasantry, for example, those he made to his students at the supper table, usually concerned their behavior, not their social status. Spread over two decades, without any concentration at a given point in time, such remarks often delivered moral censure, sometimes mentioning peasants alone, sometimes mentioning them among other social groups,²⁴ as violators of God's law. It must be remembered that what we have from Luther's talk at the supper table is what his students heard him say rather than what he actually said, and that he was often unguarded and cavalier when chatting with his students. However we evaluate the larger significance of what he said, his most frequent comments on peasants, as on nobles and townspeople, were negative. The peasants were arrogant and greedy,²⁵ but so were bankers; both groups "ride the dollar," and thereby oppress the poverty-

stricken, who truly were objects of Luther's social concern.²⁶ Peasants frequently displayed ingratitude, presumably toward God.²⁷ Once Luther vented his spleen against some unnamed scoundrels with the off-hand observation that children of nobles and townspeople were raised to be well-behaved, but that the children of peasants and princes always want to avoid punishment.²⁸

Luther particularly criticized the contempt for God's Word among the peasantry²⁹ and objected to the way they often treated village pastors. He complained about peasants who had told the governmental officials who inspected congregations in the exercise of the office of visitor that they should not have to pay their pastors since they had to pay those who tended the sheep that supplied their physical needs, "and we must have shepherds."³⁰ He told of the pastor in Holsdorf, Saxony, who refused to admit some peasants to the Lord's Supper because they did not know the catechism and could not pray. When this pastor admonished them, they replied that they did not have to know how to pray because they were paying the pastor to pray for them.³¹ However, Luther grouped peasants with townspeople and nobles who also objected to their pastors' denunciation of their pride and godlessness.³² On the other hand, he could attribute the peasants' faults to misgovernment and lack of proper discipline from the nobility;³³ the princes and nobles had provoked them to rebellion, and the Peasants Revolt was only a primer on rebellion, an introduction to revolt before the catastrophe which the misgovernment of the princes and nobles was bringing upon Germany.³⁴ Alongside all the criticism of the peasantry he made with one degree of seriousness or another to his students, it must be noted that he also praised peasants for their strong trust in God, which arose from their receiving the fruit of the earth directly.³⁵

Against this background Luther was drawn into commenting on the newest threat of peasant insurrection in the spring of 1525. After sporadic outbreaks of violence in 1524 in the south German countryside, in the vicinity of Lake Constance, a group of peasants near Memmingen decided to petition for the return of some of their traditional rights, that were gradually being reduced by the introduction of Roman law to replace Germanic tribal common law. Roman law had no concept of community property. That meant

that what traditionally had been regarded as woodland, meadow, or creeks that belonged to the peasant community was being redefined as the property of the local noble family.³⁶ The peasants named potential arbiters for their dispute, and Luther was among them. Luther responded to the "Twelve Articles" which the Memmingen peasants published in early 1525 in April, in a treatise entitled *An Admonition to Peace. A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants*. Its beginning must have pleased the peasants, for it laid blame for "this disastrous rebellion" on princes and bishops who had oppressed their people with tyrannous measures and policies. Luther threatened them with God's wrath because they had not exercised their office, which demanded that they avoid injustice and properly care for the subjects whom God had entrusted to them. Their repressive measures against both the gospel of Christ and against their own subjects were calling for divine punishment.

But, on the other hand, Luther argued that God's order for his world demanded that the peasants obey governmental authorities. He also expressed his fear that resorting to violence would bring more harm to the innocent than to the guilty. Furthermore, Luther objected to their labeling their own cause "Christian." He distinguished what is simply right and just in civil society, whether done by Christians or non-Christians, from that which is Christian.³⁷ His distinction of the realm of faith from the realm of this world's affairs informed this comment. He had expressed his distinction of the two realms quite clearly at least two years earlier, in his *On Temporal Authority*, and it had become part of his way of understanding the way in which God's creation is to function.³⁸ The Christian's claim to this-earthly rights is based on universal justice, not some special "Christian" status. Luther also expressed his anxiety over the implications for the reform of the church if reform was associated with law-breaking and the collapse of public order. Finally, Luther admonished his peasant readers that the injustices committed by governing authorities did not justify peasant injustice, which he deemed the inevitable result of revolt and the bloodshed it would produce. God, he assured readers, is with his people in their suffering, a reflection of his "theology of the cross."³⁹ He observed that God's people are like God on the cross, albeit with a different purpose for

their suffering and with different effects than Christ's atoning suffering. For they bear suffering in order to combat evil and promote the good without bearing others' sinfulness. Their weapon against wrongdoing consists of prayer, not resort to arms (Rom. 12:19; 1 Cor. 6:1-2; 2 Cor. 10:4, 12:9; Matt. 5:44).

Luther confessed his own incompetence at judging the legal issues which the Memmingen articles raised, including rights to hunt, fish, use wood from forest, and the level of rents and taxes charged the peasants. He did support their petition to choose their own pastors, but if rulers refused, he offered the somewhat naïve advice that peasants should choose exile rather than rebellion. Tithes he regarded as a secular tax, even if theoretically they supported the church, and therefore, he accorded the right to set and collect them to the lords. The nobles also had the right to hold others in serfdom, Luther believed, concurring with the argument his supporter, Urbanus Rhegius, pastor in Augsburg, had published a few months before.⁴⁰ Luther's response to the peasants must have disappointed the peasants although it could not have pleased their rulers, either.⁴¹

Luther traveled to his birthplace in Mansfeld county in early May of 1525 to visit relatives and on the way was threatened by a group of peasants, who had not presented peaceful petitions of the sort composed for the Memmingen peasants to the south. This first-hand experience with the menacing mood among the rural populace and the inactivity of central German governments in regard to such deterioration of public order made Luther realize that neither his counsel to the peasants nor his call to the princes to repent had found a sympathetic audience. Erfurt, the city where he had studied, and other towns were capitulating to the demands of their peasants. Peasant groups had burned and sacked castles and monasteries in several regions of Germany not far from Wittenberg. The government of electoral Saxony suffered paralysis because Elector Frederick the Wise lay on his deathbed.⁴²

The fact that a distant group of peasants had asked him to mediate in their behalf confirmed a number of other signals that Luther was being drawn into a position of public responsibility that demanded a clear statement regarding the peasants' claims and peasant use of violence. He believed a sharp, harsh call for action was the only

thing he could do to restore peace and stability to the general populace. He set pen to paper and composed *Against the Robbing, Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, intending it to be an appendix to a new printing of *Admonition to Peace*; that meant that his call for suppression of violence should be read in the context of his criticism of both peasants and governing authorities for their respective abuses of power.⁴³ *Against the Robbing, Murdering Hordes*, which appeared separately from a number of printers in various parts of Germany, is a short treatise calling on secular rulers to oppose the destruction Satan was spreading across the land like a raging fire. They could do so by restoring order through armed force. He reasoned that the leaders of the peasant uprisings had broken their feudal oaths, were fomenting violence across Germany, and were using the label "Christian brothers" to veil their disobedience to God and their harm to their neighbors. The peasants who had been compelled to join the revolt by these leaders needed to be freed from their captivity. Relying on his concept of the calling of Christians to carry out the societal responsibilities which God has placed on all people, Luther urged secular officials to do what God had called them to do as agents of God's desire for civil peace-keeping in society. They were to restore public order; they were, if necessary, to "smite, slay, and stab" those who were visiting destruction upon people and property if they did not lay down their arms and end their rebellion. Government officials acting in this role would "release, rescue, help" the rebels' victims, also those other peasants coerced into their bands. This was all the more urgent, Luther believed, because Christ was coming soon to end this present age.⁴⁴

By the time Luther's brief tract appeared in print, central German rulers had already launched their retaliation against the peasants. On May 15 the battle of Frankenhausen, the decisive engagement between Thuringian peasants and local rulers, left thousands dead on the battlefield. Thomas Müntzer was captured, interrogated, and executed twelve days later. Luther's Roman Catholic opponents and even some of his adherents registered their indignation at his harsh words. He replied with a brief defense, entitled *An Open Letter on the Harsh Book against the Peasants*, in the summer of 1525. It maintained that the necessity of restoring public order had superseded any other

considerations because all would be harmed by the chaos and arbitrary carnage of the insurgency. He rejected the criticism that he was currying the rulers' favor and support and repeated his call to them to repent of their injustice and of their excessive use of force in suppressing the Revolt, sharply reprimanding those who were undertaking oppressive measures after the peasant defeat as "furious, raving, senseless tyrants," bloodthirsty dogs who belonged to the devil and were bound for hell.⁴⁵ A year later, addressing a question from a follower, Assa von Kram, who served Duke Ernst of Braunschweig-Lüneburg as a professional soldier, Luther wrote *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can be Saved*. In this treatise he illustrated his proposition that military service can be a godly calling if carried out in the service of a just cause and public order, by citing the suppression of the peasants as an example of the just use of force to restore order and tranquility.⁴⁶

In his responses to the peasant demands and the violence that had accompanied them in some areas Luther's chief concern was not the reinforcement of growing princely absolutism or unleashing the power of the princes. His concern arose out of his fear of public disorder, his firm conviction that arbitrary use of violence in behalf of justice always wrought more injustice than did the tyranny it opposed. He was further concerned to prevent the association of the Reformation with such violence and disorder, for he believed that the Last Day was approaching and that Satan was trying in every way possible to divert attention from the revival of the gospel of Christ.

Luther's position on the Peasants Revolt is generally viewed without reference to what others were saying at the same time. A number of other Evangelical reformers also issued brief treatises on the events of 1524-1526 as they were taking place. They included Jakob Strauss in Eisleben, Urbanus Rhegius in Augsburg, Johannes Brenz in Schwäbisch Hall, Andreas Osiander in Nuremberg, Johannes Rurer in Ansbach, Johannes Lachmann in Heilbronn, Johann Poliander in Mansfeld, and Johannes Eberlin in Günzburg as well as two at Luther's side in Wittenberg, Philip Melancthon and Johann Agricola. They all issued brief treatises on aspects of the Peasants Revolt. Some showed more sympathy with the peasants' cause and concerns than did Luther, but they all opposed the peasants' use of violence in pursuing their aims. Particularly Brenz condemned the

princes for their severe punishment of rebels.⁴⁷ Some of these authors and other supporters of Luther did offer passing defenses of his stance; only Poliander dedicated an entire (though brief) publication as a rejoinder to criticism of his mentor's public statements. Poliander attributed Luther's attitude toward the Revolt to his personal experience with angry peasant mobs, to his opposition to the confusion of temporal goals with the gospel itself, and to his desire to counteract Satan's efforts to bring the preaching of the gospel into disrepute through associating Wittenberg preaching with disorder in society.⁴⁸

Whatever the extent of public comment at the time, it is remarkable how little comment Luther's stand on the Peasants Revolt elicited in the months and years immediately following, not only from Luther's followers but also from the reformer himself. Once he commented at table that the Roman Catholics had attacked his books against the peasants and the Sacramentarians, but his elaboration of this observation concentrated on how the Roman Catholics were unable themselves to answer the Sacramentarians, with no further reference to difficulties because of the treatises on the Revolt.⁴⁹

For the peasantry the suppression of this series of revolts decisively discouraged the use of armed force and diminished (although did not eliminate!⁵⁰) reports of unrest in the countryside and among laborers in the towns. In some areas rather severe suffering took place, according to Luther's own critical remarks about the bloodthirsty princes, and in general the period marked the loss of rights that had begun a generation earlier with the introduction of Roman law on a wide scale in the German empire.

For Luther the Peasants Revolt has been viewed by later friends and foes alike as the occasion for his turning against the peasantry, with a resulting loss of support among the peasants, but neither is the case as research has shown. Luther wrote against rebellious peasant leaders in behalf of society as a whole and also in behalf of those peasants who, he had heard according to reports from relatives and others, were being forced into participation in the risky enterprise of revolt. His position opposing violence was clear in his earlier writings, and his first response to peasant demands was clear in its rejection of all use of force on their behalf. He acted out of his own concerns both for peace, order, and tranquility in society and

for the spread of the gospel without the diversion and distraction that he was sure peasant violence would cause. Once the Revolt had passed, it commanded little attention from him. Much more serious in his view were the continuing sins of the peasantry, particularly in their treatment of their pastors and in their desire to take advantage of those who purchased their products. On the basis of his own family's situation, he viewed peasants as people with a good life, not as oppressed and downtrodden people. On the other hand, he sharply criticized rulers who did not execute justice for the peasants and their other subjects, and he uncompromisingly called down God's judgment upon unjust princes and municipal authorities.

Luther continued to mention the vices of peasants throughout his career, but he also continued to voice his concern for their just treatment and their well-being. What scholars have not always as clearly emphasized is that he also never stopped calling the ruling class to repentance and to the exercise of just governance. Indeed, his address to secular rulers in 1525 was not his last word to them.

Luther and the Princes

Luther's criticism of peasants cannot be fully understood apart from an examination of his treatment of other segments of the population, particularly the princes. In spite of—or perhaps because of—his concern for public order Luther did not submit to governing authorities with blind obedience or unconditional support. His concern for both public justice and tranquility and for the individual's relationship with God governed his attitude toward all. His concern that, in their own spheres, both peasants and princes could compromise the gospel and their own standing before God drove him to call those in both estates to repentance. Rather he exercised sharp criticism against abuses of princely power from early in his career to the end of his day, as a person exercising public responsibility. The reformer conducted running battles regarding his teaching with King Henry VIII of England before 1525⁵¹ and with German princes, most notably Duke Georg of Saxony and Duke Heinrich of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, in subsequent years.⁵² He sharply criticized their persecution of those who advocated Reformation in the Wittenberg

manner. Furthermore, he wrote many "opinions" for governments across Germany and beyond, displaying independent, even if not always (from a modern perspective) informed, judgments on a wide array of public policy issues. In addition to a brief "mirror of the prince" in his discourse on temporal authority of 1523,⁵³ he also composed two commentaries, on Psalm 82 and Psalm 101, which served as instruction and admonition to secular rulers, somewhat following the model of the genre called "the mirror of the prince."⁵⁴ Sixteenth-century "mirrors of princes," such as the more famous examples by Niccolo Machiavelli (*Il Principio*), by Thomas More (*Utopia*), and Desiderius Erasmus (*Institutio principis christiani*),⁵⁵ all served to present their author's view of the structures and principles of social reality as well as directives for the proper behavior of those exercising secular authority. This tradition goes back to ancient times. Augustine reflected the Christian ideals for secular rulers in *De Civitate Dei* and other works, and from time to time throughout the Middle Ages such works were composed for a variety of reasons.⁵⁶ Scholars give broader and narrower definitions of the genre, but all such handbooks for those in power offer advice and instruction for rulers, present or future, setting forth norms, principles, and guidelines for responsible leadership, sometimes with simple dicta, sometimes with biographical examples from history or literature.⁵⁷

Luther composed his commentary on Psalm 82 in the weeks before the imperial diet met in 1530 in Augsburg. Political issues of several kinds loomed on the Wittenberg horizon, including the right of the princes of the empire to resist the emperor should he make war against the Protestant governments. He labeled princes "saviors, fathers, and deliverers" of their subjects. God placed them in office to give aid to these subjects, to provide for them and protect them, and to support the church without interfering in its conduct of the preaching of God's Word.⁵⁸

Luther's interpretation of the term "the gods" in Psalm 82:1 identified them as secular rulers, whom God has put in place as part of his order for the world. Luther attacked the medieval view of the relationship between the papacy and the clergy, on the one side, and those responsible for secular government, on the other. He maintained that the light of the gospel as the Wittenberg reformers were proclaiming

it had finally informed German society of the proper relationship between the two and had ended the claims that popes, priests, and monks could exact obedience from governmental authorities. The congregation of God's people is to obey secular government because God commanded it; secular government is obliged by God's calling to practice justice and preserve peace. God's Word stands over both the clergy and the rulers, and the law of God threatens and condemns both disobedient subjects and arrogant princes.⁵⁹

Scholars distinguish between advice given to princes for knowing what is right or virtuous, and instruction on how to carry out their office wisely, with the proper practical activities.⁶⁰ Luther's treatment of Psalm 82 concentrated on the proper activities of the ruler. They consist of "doing justice to the God-fearing and thwarting the wicked," or promoting the preaching of God's Word and the salvation of many people; aiding and supporting the poor, suffering, orphans and widows, and giving them justice; and protecting subjects from every kind of attack and evil, establishing and preserving peace.⁶¹ Luther then condemned three princely vices: doing nothing to promote God's Word, not giving proper attention to their governing responsibilities and thus not providing justice and protection to the poor and needy; and practicing a sinful way of life, conducting their office in a selfish manner, as if God had given them their authority for their use and honor, their own desires and arrogance, their own pride and splendor, and they have no obligation to help or serve anyone."⁶²

Luther emphasized that preachers of God's Word are also obligated to call governing officials to repentance. "It would lead to much more rebellion if preachers would not condemn the vices of their rulers," he wrote. Failing to hold rulers accountable makes the mob angry and discontented, and it also strengthens the tyrants' wickedness. The preachers become accomplices of such evil and bring guilt upon themselves when they avoid such a preaching of repentance to government officials. For "the office of the Word is not the office of a courtier or a hired hand. He is God's servant and minion."⁶³ Luther's political theory in this treatise, as in all his comment on secular government, proceeded from his concept of the walks of life which constitute human existence and its social structures as well as the responsibilities God has built into each. God exercises his providence

and his rule through his human creatures as they fulfill the callings he has given them in life.

Four years later, in 1534, Luther again wrote a commentary on a psalm, Psalm 101, and fashioned it into a "mirror of the prince." The reformer's close friend, Elector Johann, had died; his son Johann Friedrich the Elder had assumed the throne in 1532. Johann Friedrich had grown up at his parents' court, where Luther was considered a special prophet of God. The young prince admired the reformer very much, and Luther seems to have been fond of his new prince even if not so closely bound to him as he had been to Johann Friedrich's father. Indeed, the reformer did not hesitate to criticize Johann Friedrich's advisors and even the elector himself.⁶⁴ That criticism emerges gently but firmly in the commentary on the psalm.⁶⁵ It is true that the stated purpose of the treatise was to reject the claims of the upper clergy, who daily sing the psalms, including Psalm 101, but who slander temporal rulers every day and "practically trample on them with their feet."⁶⁶ However, throughout the treatise secular princes among the readers are admonished to follow the pattern of life described in the psalm; its descriptions of the ideal prince from David's pen serve as a textbook for ruling officials, according to Luther. David is the true "model of the proper ruler."⁶⁷ Luther forthrightly discussed David's sins elsewhere, including his sins in the conduct of his office of ruler of Israel, for example, in commenting on Psalm 51,⁶⁸ but here he ignored his flaws and vices. "Dear David is so highly gifted and such a wonderful, special hero, that he is not only innocent of all deception and murder, which took place in his realm, but he opposed such liars and murderers and could not tolerate them. He turned on them so that they had to yield,"⁶⁹ an interpretation of the Israelite king's life that stands, at least in part, at odds with the biblical record and Luther's own judgment elsewhere.

The king's depiction of the good ruler in this psalm corresponded to Luther's understanding of the two realms. The psalm presents

many fine princely virtues which [David] practiced. This psalm does not deal with how we should serve God but rather how we should do what is right to other people, to each person in an appropriate way. Just as in the spiritual realm or with spiritual responsibilities people are instructed how to act toward God in proper fashion and receive salvation, so the earthly realm gives instructions

on how people should act and govern themselves among other people, so that body, property, honor, wife, child, house, home and all other blessings may remain in peace and security and prosper on earth.⁷⁰

In general, Luther praised the virtues of self-discipline, humility, diligence, and above all fear and reverence toward God as the most desirable characteristics of the ruler.

Also in this treatise Luther insisted on the right and obligation of preachers to admonish princes and their counselors. "When a preacher exercises his office and says to kings and princes and the entire world, 'Remember, fear God and obey his commandments,' he is not interfering with temporal authority, but he is serving it and is obedient to the highest authority by doing this. The entire spiritual realm is nothing other than service to God's authority. That is why [preachers] are called God's footsoldiers and Christ's servants in Scripture."⁷¹

Luther presented his high standards for princely performance in other writings to the end of his life. One example may suffice. His treatment of Joseph as a ruling official in Egypt in his Genesis commentary (particularly on 41:33–51 and 47:12–26) set forth for Wittenberg students a model for preaching to their own congregations so that they would properly exercise their responsibility to call governing officials to repentance.⁷² Joseph's story reminded Luther that God wishes to combat the devil and to maintain peace and order through the virtuous individuals who serve society as governing authorities.⁷³ "If I do not respect the political authorities, I cannot live in security, protected from robbers, and am alienated from my neighbor. Therefore, it is to my advantage to honor princes and pastors, so that I can live a peaceful and upright life and can practice piety and useful skills. That all is connected with God's will and society's needs."⁷⁴ But even more often Luther pointed to Joseph in demonstrating to his students how they should urge virtue upon the rulers who heard their preaching and how they should condemn those rulers' vices.

Luther believed that Joseph's example demonstrated that the good ruler is first of all a good human being. That means that his prime virtue is trust in God, a model for life that Luther presented in his *Large Catechism*, beginning with the central role of the first commandment.⁷⁵ Joseph's example admonishes rulers to fear God, practice humility,

and follow the will of God,⁷⁶ always remembering that they owe everything to God, who governs each human life and all of human history. He turned the evil that Joseph's brothers committed against him to good for Joseph, his entire family, and the nation of Egypt.⁷⁷

Joseph practiced many other virtues as well, including those virtues that Moses would later demonstrate in addition to his spiritual strength, including diligence, wisdom, and courage.⁷⁸ Joseph advised Pharaoh to find a man of understanding, wisdom and courage (Gen 41:33), and Pharaoh did it by picking Joseph himself. Luther defined wisdom as embracing the ability to make good judgments, thoroughness, and perspicuity, with the ability logically to avoid false conclusions, sophistries, and other intellectual traps.⁷⁹

Luther reminded his hearers that their princes should be bold, defying the devil himself, through the power of the Holy Spirit, even as Joseph had laughed at death and hell with the courage of a lion when he was in prison.⁸⁰ Humility and moderation belong to the good ruler; pride and arrogance are the devil's poison.⁸¹ Joseph's example should encourage rulers to fear God, hold themselves in low regard, and love other people as Joseph did when he showed sympathy for his brothers.⁸² These characteristics lead good rulers to support subjects with temporal blessings, discipline the unruly, defend the suffering, and punish the guilty. That is possible only with faith in God and humility before him.⁸³

On the basis of Joseph's example Luther sharply criticized princely tyranny and negligence in office. Their ambition and arrogance enflame them against God and their people.⁸⁴ They do not listen to the proclamation of God's Word, and they fail to exercise their rule properly. They ignore crime.⁸⁵ They fail to support the church and its pastors.⁸⁶ They raise taxes unreasonably.⁸⁷ Worse than the princes were their counselors. Those who were efficient in the exercise of their duties too often administered their responsibilities to their own benefit rather than the benefit of their princes' subjects, for whom they were supposed to be ruling. They resembles wolves, foxes, vultures, and other birds of prey in their striving for their own advantage.⁸⁸ He directly criticized Johann Friedrich's court for its wastefulness to his students in the context of his exposition of the story of Joseph.⁸⁹ Luther was coming to the end of his life as he delivered his lectures on Joseph. For two decades he

had taught students to be prepared to admonish the governmental officials whom they would serve for the benefit of their subjects. From the pulpit and in print he had proclaimed God's law to public officials, demanding that they exercise their God-given offices for the welfare of those whom God had entrusted to their political care.

Conclusion

Understandably, some who use history to interpret their own nineteenth- and twentieth-century political or social causes have found it necessary or at least helpful to focus on Luther, often as a root for abuses and injustices in the early modern period. In some instances subsequent interpreters of Luther have justified such criticism through their own misuse of his words and actions. A closer look at what Luther wrote and did is necessary if we wish to deal with the genuine historical phenomenon that he was. Although he never ceased mentioning the need for peasants to repent, he called more often and more forcefully for princes to repent, of a variety of sins, including their tyranny over the peasantry. Luther did not treat any social grouping of late medieval society preferentially; apart from the very concrete circumstances of their specific callings, his message for all focused upon repentance for wrong-doing, forgiveness of sins, and proper exercise of personal responsibility according to God's commands within their respective callings. Against peasants he conveyed the message of God's wrath even as he called on them to embrace the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in Jesus Christ. He delivered the same message to those with political authority as well as townspeople, merchants and artisans alike. When he singled out peasants from people in general, it was always in references to specific sins or their need for the gospel. The reaction of Luther to the Peasants Revolt must be understood in this context and not viewed apart from his continuing call for repentance and admonition to justice which he delivered to those with political power. That simply reflects his understanding of God's order for human life and of his own calling.

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NOTES

1. Johannes Mathesius, *Historien/Von des Ehrwürdigen in Gott Seligen theuren Manns Gottes/Doctoris Martini Luthers/anfang/lehr/leben vnd sterben . . .* (Nuremberg: Johann von Berg's heirs and Ulrich Neuber, 1566): XLVIa-XLVIIIb; Ludwig Rabus, *Historien der Martyrer/Ander Theil . . .* (Strassburg: Johann Rihel, 1572): 166a.
2. Johannes Cochlaeus, *Commentaria de actis et scriptis Martini Lutheri Saxonis . . .* (Mainz: Franz Behem, 1549), 107–117.
3. Wilhelm Stolze, "Der geistige Hintergrund des Bauernkrieges: Erasmus und Luther," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 51 (1932): 456–479.
4. Peter Blickle, "Communal Reformation: Zwingli, Luther, and the south of the Holy Roman Empire," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 6, Reform and Expansion 1500–1660*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 75–89, esp. 76–81; cf. Peter Blickle, Peter Bierbrauer, Renate Blickle, and Claudia Ulbrich, *Aufbruch und Empörung? Studien zum bauerlichen Widerstand im Alten Reich* (Munich: Beck, 1980), Peter Blickle, *Der Bauernkrieg. Die Revolution des Gemeinen Mannes* (Munich: Beck, 1998); and idem, *Landschaften im Alten Reich, Die Staatliche Funktion des gemeinen Mannes in Oberdeutschland* (Munich: Beck, 1973). See also Thomas A. Brady, Jr., *Turning Swiss. Cities and Empire 1450–1550* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): esp. 151–183.
5. Franz Lau, *Der Bauernkrieg und das angebliche Ende der Lutherischen Reformation als spontaner "Der Volksbewegung," Lutherjahrbuch* 26 (1959): 109–134.
6. Friedrich Engels, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* (London, 1850).
7. August Bebel, *Der Deutsche Bauernkrieg* (Braunschweig: Bracke, 1876); Karl Kautsky, *Die Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus. Bd. 2. Von Thomas More bis zum Vorabend der französischen Revolution* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1895).
8. Moisei M. Smirin, *Die Volksreformation des Thomas Münzer und der grosse Bauernkrieg* (Berlin: Dietz, 1952) (in German translation of the original Russian).
9. Max Steinmetz, *Deutschland von 1476 bis 1648* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1965).
10. *Der Theologe Thomas Muntzer*, ed. Siegfried Bräuer and Helmar Junghans (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1989); see Helmar Junghans, *Martin Luther in Two Centuries* (Saint Paul: Lutheran Brotherhood Foundation Reformation Library, 1992): 69–85.
11. See Walter Mostert, "Luther, Martin. III. Wirkungsgeschichte," in *Theologische Realenzyklop.*, ed. Gerhard Müller, 21 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991): 570–571, 588–589.
12. William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).
13. W. D. J. Cargill Thompson, "Luther and the Right of Resistance to the Emperor," in *Studies in Church History*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975): 159–202, and especially his *The Political Thought of Martin Luther* (Sussex: Harvester, 1984).
14. James M. Estes, *Peace, Order and the Glory of God. Secular Authority and the Church in the Thought of Luther and Melancthon 1518–1559* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).
15. Mark U. Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles. Politics and Polemics, 1531–1546* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983): 20–37; W. Cargill Thompson, "Luther and the Right of Resistance to the Emperor."

16. Uwe Siemon-Netto, *The Fabricated Luther. Refuting Nazi Connections and Other Modern Myths*, 2. ed., (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2007).

17. Robert Scribner, "The Reformation Movements in Germany," in *The New Cambridge Modern History, Volume II, The Reformation 1520–1559*, Geoffrey Elton, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 86–87; Tom Scott, *Town, Country, and Regions in Reformation Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 3–188; *Bundschuh, Untergrombach 1502, das unruhige Reich und die Revolutionierbarkeit Europas*, ed. Peter Blickle and Thomas Adam (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2004).

18. WA (see note 37 below) *Tischreden* [henceforth TR] 1:35–36, #94, LW 54:11. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, tr. James L. Schaaf, 1 (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1985): 23–29.

19. Estes, *Peace*, 42–44.

20. Martin Greschat, "Luthers Haltung im Bauernkrieg," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 56 (1965): 31–47.

21. WA TR 3:627, §2802.

22. On the spectrum of economic and political situations of the peasantry in south-western Germany at this time, see David Sabean, *Landbesitz und Gesellschaft am Vorabend des Bauernkrieges. Eine Studie der sozialen Verhältnisse im südlichen Oberschwaben in den Jahren vor 1525* (Stuttgart: Fischer, 1972). It should also be noted that the Peasants Revolt also gave more powerful princes the opportunity to exploit the uncertainties of public disorder in the period to advance their own power at the expense of nearby, less powerful princes; see Thomas F. Sea, "Predatory Protectors? Conflict and Cooperation in the Suppression of the German Peasants' Revolt of 1525," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 39 (2008): 89–111.

23. WA TR 5:558, §6251.

24. WA TR 1: §50, p. 17.

25. WA TR 3:231, §3238; WA TR 1:17, § 50; see also WA TR 3:204–205, §3163b.

26. WA TR 4:99, §4046; cf. 5:513, §6149.

27. WA TR 2:100, §1435; 2:282, §1967; 2:318, §2087; 2:524–525, §2560.

28. WA TR 3:415, §3564.

29. WA TR 1:43–44, §115; 1:146, §352; 3:292–293, §3366.

30. WA TR 4:68, §4002; cf. 2:260–261, §1909; 2:252, §2622.

31. WA TR 6:163, §6752.

32. WA TR 4:73, §4007.

33. WA TR 2:371, §2230.

34. WA TR 5:284, 285, §5835.

35. WA TR 1:193, §443.

36. Gerald Strauss, *Law, Resistance, and the State. The Opposition to Roman Law in Reformation Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 56–95; Gottfried Krodell, "Luther and the Opposition to Roman Law in Germany," *Lutherjahrbuch* 58 (1991): 13–42.

37. *Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 57 vols. Eds. J.F.K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Bohlau, 1883 ff.) 18:291–334. (Hereafter cited as WA.) *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols. Eds. Pelikan and Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.) 46:17–43. (Hereafter cited as LW.)

38. WA 11:245–281, LW 45:81–129.

39. See, my "Luther's Theology of the Cross Fifteen Years after Heidelberg: Lectures on the Psalms of Ascent," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (forthcoming), and the literature referred to there.

40 *Von leibaygenschaft oder knechthait* , (s 1, 1525) See Robert Kolb, "The Theologians and the Peasants: Conservative Evangelical Reactions to the German Peasants Revolt," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 69 (1978) 103–31

41 WA 18 291–334, LW 46 17–43, Mark U Edwards, Jr., *Luther and the False Brethren* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975) 60–81

42 Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther, 2: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532*, trans James L. Schaff (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 172–194

43 Albert Clos, "Zur näheren Bestimmung der Abfassungszeit von Luthers Schrift 'Wider die rauberischen und morderischen Rotten der Bauern' 1525," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 33 (1936) 126–133

44 WA 18 357–361, LW 46 49–55

45 WA 18 384–401, LW 46 63–85 Behind this treatise lies a sermon preached on June 4, 1525, "Verantwortung D Martin Luthers auff das Buchlein wider die Reuberischen und morderischen Bawren," WA 17,1 264–268

46 WA 19 19 627, 13–14, 630, 16–27, 652, 6–24, LW 46 97, 100–101, 125

47 Kolb, "The Theologians and the Peasants," 103–131

48 *Ein vrtayl Johann Polanders / vber das hart Bu[e]chlein Doctor Martinus Luthers under die auffruhr der Pauren / hievor ausgegangen* (n.p., 1525)

49 WA TR 4 653 § 5092

50 Blickle et al., *Aufruhr und Empörung?*, especially 50–61, 95–114, 68–187, 237–256 It is difficult to appraise how serious revolts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were, but they did not attract the same measure of reaction that the revolts of 1524–1526 did. On religious life in peasant villages after the Reformation in Hesse, see David Mayes, *Communal Christianity: The Life and Loss of a Peasant Vision in Early Modern Germany* (Boston: Brill, 2004)

51 WA 10,2 180–262 Luther again took the occasion to criticize Henry when, in 1540 the king executed Robert Barnes, who had studied in Wittenberg, for holding the Lutheran heresy, see his preface to Barnes' confession of faith, WA 51 448–451

52 Edwards, *Last Battles*, 38–67, 143–62

53 *On Temporal Authority*, 1523, WA 18 271 27–280 19, LW 45 118–129

54 See Robert Kolb, "Die Josef-Geschichten als Fürstenspiegel in der Wittenberger Auslegungstradition, 'Ein weiser und verständiger Mann' (Genesis 42,33)," in *Christlicher Glaube und weltliche Herrschaft, zum Gedenken an Gunther Wartenberg*, ed Michael Beyer et al. (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2008) 43–46

55 See Theo Stammen, "Fürstenspiegel als literarische Gattung politischer Theorie im zeitgenössischen Kontext—ein Versuch," in *Politische Tugendlehre und Regierungskunst: Studien zum Fürstenspiegel der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed Hans-Otto Muhleisen und Theo Stammen (Tübingen: Niermeyer, 1990) 254–285

56 Wilhelm Berges, *Die Fürstenspiegel des hohen und späten Mittelalters* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1938)

57 Bruno Singer, *Die Fürstenspiegel in Deutschland im Zeitalter des Humanismus und der Reformation* (Munich: Fink, 1981)

58 WA 31 I 189–218, cf James M. Estes, *Peace*, 181–188

59 WA 31 I 191 32–36, 189 21–190, 24 193 7–196, 3 See Estes, *Peace*, I–52, 179–212, Cargill Thompson, *Political Thought of Martin Luther*, 1–78, Paul Althaus, *Die Ethik Martin Luthers* (Gutersloh: Mohn, 1965) 116–158

60 Barbara Maigler-Loeser, *Historie und Exemplum im Fürstenspiegel* (Neuried, 2004), 11

61. WA 31 I:199.4–5, 200.5–6, 201.26–27; compare 205, 19–18. On Luther's stance toward the obligation of governmental officials to support the life of the church, see Estes, *Peace*, esp. passim, esp. 179–81, 205–12.

62. WA 31 I:214, 20–215, 12.

63. WA 31 I:196.19–198, 18, bes. 197.3–198, 2 und 198.12–13.

64. On the relationship between the electoral court and the team of reformers around Luther, see Gunther Wartenberg, "Luthers Beziehungen zu den sächsischen Fürsten," in *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546*, ed. Helmar Junghans (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983), 554–561; Georg Mentz, *Johann Friedrich der Grossmachtige, 1503–1554* (Jena: Fischer, 1903–1908), 1:30–41. On the relationship of Elector Johann Friedrich and his estates with the faculty at Wittenberg in introducing reforms, see Siegrid Westphal, "Die Ausgestaltung des Kirchenwesens unter Johann Friedrich—ein landesherrliches Kirchenregiment?," in: *Johann Friedrich I—der Lutherische Kurfürst*, ed. Volker Leppin et al., (Gutersloh: Gutersloher Verlagshaus 2006): 261–280.

65. WA 51:200–264; on the implicit critique of the elector, see p. 198, in the introduction by E. Thiele und O. Brenner. See Estes, *Peace*, 193–205.

66. WA 51:201, 2–3.

67. The phrase is from Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther und das Alte Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1948), 9. WA 51:227, 37–38 Vgl. Wolfgang Sommer, *Gottesfurcht und Fürstentherrschaft: Studien zum Obrigkeitsverständnis Johann Arndts und lutherischer Hofprediger zur Zeit der altprotestantischen Orthodoxie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988): 23–73.

68. See his draft of 1532, WA 31,1:539,5–540,2; the printed version of the 1532 lectures contains similar and more extensive comments, WA 40,2: 317.34–327, 28.330.22–350 28.415.24–417.17.

69. WA 51:234.12–16, 235.10–16.

70. WA 51:241 31–42.

71. WA 51:240.7–12.

72. The following material is taken from Kolb, "Josef-Geschichten," 46–52.

73. WA 44:435.30–33.

74. WA 44:437.8–12; vgl. WA 44:440.33–441, 2.

75. *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (11 ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 560–567; *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000): 386–392

76. WA 44:433.15–26.

77. WA 44:421.39–422, 4, .422.14–16, 31–33.

78. WA 44:428.10–11, vgl. WA 44:437.32–36.

79. WA 44:415.15–21

80. WA 44:425.22–39, and 427.18–22; cf. WA 44:428.11 – 16; 444.10–11.32–39.

81. WA 44:432.26–28.

82. WA 44:434.26–435, 27.

83. WA 44:433.26–434, 10.

84. WA 44:665.3–7, 436, 27–31.

85. WA 44:667.32–35.

86. WA 44:670.28–671, 18.

87. WA 44:417.33–418,6.

88. WA 44:416.13–17.

89. WA 44:451.40–452, 5.

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