

**A BIOGRAPHY OF MARTIN LUTHER: WITH BRIEF REFERENCES TO HIS  
CONTEMPORARIES**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Writing a short biographical article on a figure like Martin Luther in the contemporary context of celebrating 500 years of the Reformation this year, is a particularly daunting challenge. It provides a particularly tricky task to produce something valuable for a Protestant audience obviously familiar with the great reformer, a man ranked by Time Magazine in 2013 as the 17<sup>th</sup> most influential human being in history.<sup>59</sup> Luther is renowned as the great church reformer, the theologian, the hymnist and Christian philosopher. However, his personal life, i.e. his existence as a man and his self-reflection upon his existence as an object of divine providence in his given historical context is one aspect that has always intrigued me of the great German Reformer. What kind of things was he really passionate about, what drove him, excited him or, if you will, got his adrenalin pumping? Who was he as a man to those contemporaries of his who truly knew him on a personal level? So in the spirit of writing a sketch of Luther's *bios* (life), I focus on those questions regarding the internal energies that drove this *bios*, and allow these central questions to guide my biographical exploration of the historical giant that was Martin Luther.

**BIOGRAPHY**

Born in a peasant family in the town of Eisleben, Germany during November 1483, Luther

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<sup>59</sup> Steven Skienna. & Charles B. Ward, "Who's Biggest? The 100 Most Significant Figures in History," *Time Magazine*, December 10, 2013, accessed 2 July 2017, <http://ideas.time.com/2013/12/10/whos-biggest-the-100-most-significant-figures-in-history/>.

would in a later self-reflection on his background describe his father as “a poor miner” and himself as the “son of a peasant”.<sup>60</sup> These humble reflections on his childhood should not be simply taken at face value nor be interpreted by the commonly prevailing (yet prejudiced) notions of 15<sup>th</sup> century European peasant life. Firstly, Luther’s family background was, in reality, not quite as humble as these statements may seem to imply. The Luther family was, at the time, a prominent farming family in the Thuringia district in what is now central Germany. However, due to laws of single inheritance, Martin’s father Hans, as a younger son in the family, did not enjoy a claim to a share of the family land and had to turn to the trades in order to make a living. Nonetheless, while peasantry is commonly strongly associated with poverty, it has to be noted that the the 15<sup>th</sup> century actually saw a large leap in income for European peasants, who at the time even enjoyed living standards higher than many people in the world’s poorest countries do even in the twenty-first century.<sup>61</sup> Also on Luther’s mother’s side, as Luther’s great friend Philip Melancthon noted, he came from “an old and respected family”.<sup>62</sup>

Luther’s parents desired for him to make a good career as jurist, and, upon graduation with a Master’s degree in the field early in 1505, his father, with whom he enjoyed a very good relationship, gifted him a copy of the venerated Justinian Law code, *Corpus Juris*, dating from the sixth century AD.<sup>63</sup> In that same year he would enroll in the Law School at the University of Erfurt, but after only a couple of months he, a top student, would suddenly call an end to his Law studies to enroll in the local Augustinian monastery. Two events contributed to this sudden, risky and unexpected move on Luther’s part: the death of a classmate and his own experience of a close encounter with death when he was travelling during a heavy thunderstorm. Luther consequently vowed to St Anne, the grandmother of Jesus, that he would dedicate his life to God

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<sup>60</sup> Michael A Mullet, *Martin Luther*. Routledge: New York, 2015, 24-25.

<sup>61</sup> Stephen Broadberry, Bruce Campbell, Alexander Klein, Mark Overton, and Bas van Leeuwen, *British economic growth : 1270-1870*. Working Paper. Coventry, UK: Department of Economics, University of Warwick. (CAGE Online Working Paper Series), 1978 (2010).

<sup>62</sup> Phillip Melancthon, *Die Geschichte vom Leben und den Taten des ehrewürdigen Herren D. Martin Luthers: des Lehrer wahrer Theologie nach bestem Wissen beschreiben*. (edited by H. Weinacht), Theologischer Verlag: Zurich, 2008 (1547), 16.

<sup>63</sup> Roland H Bainton, *Here I Stand – A Life of Martin Luther*. Abington Press: Nashville, 1950 (2013), 8.

to become a monk.<sup>64</sup> Luther enrolled at the Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt. This life-altering decision reflected the passionate, emotional personality of the man, once described by historian Herbert David Rix as perpetually “immature and insecure”.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, this decision of Luther, one which ultimately would change the course of history, was one taken in a very deliberate fashion and which had to be accompanied by some level confidence, even if in divine grace as opposed to his own abilities. He would spend more than five years at the Erfurt monastery, until in 1511, as part of the plan of John Staupitz, a professor of theology at the young University of Wittenberg, to turn the institution into a theological hub, Luther was transferred there.<sup>66</sup>

Luther’s fervent desire to serve God and the wisdom he consequently exhibited shone through in his conduct with colleagues during this time. An intimate long-time friend of his, George Spalatin, wrote that he was not only “a most learned” but also an “upright man” - one with “acumen in judgment”.<sup>67</sup> This is a particularly noteworthy praise from a contemporary of the man who at times during his life, when overcome by emotions, made some rather harsh statements like e.g. “peasants are no better than straw ... they must be compelled to hear the crack of the whip and the whiz of bullets”<sup>68</sup> Luther said this in the context of opposing a destructive peasant revolt at the time, but the choice of words nonetheless indicate support for a rather fiery and violent response on Luther’s part.

Insight into the nature of Martin Luther’s tumultuous temperament can be gleaned from an episode in 1514, during Luther’s early days at the University in Wittenberg. In Medieval times, it was tradition that a man teach at the University where they earned their degree. Until the middle of the fifteenth century, oaths taken to this end were common, whereas the practice fell into disuse thereafter. It seems to have been revived at Erfurt at the beginning of the sixteenth century,

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<sup>64</sup> Jayson Scott Galler, *Logic and Argumentation in the Book of Concord*. Proquest: Ann Arbor, MI, 2007, 70.

<sup>65</sup> Herbert David Rix, *Martin Luther: The Man and the Image*. Irvington: New York, 1983, 11.

<sup>66</sup> Scott H Hendrix, *Martin Luther – Visionary Reformer*. Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 2015, 43-44.

<sup>67</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Correspondence and other contemporary Letters volume I*, (edited by Preserved Smith). Wips & Stock: Eugene, OR, 2006 (1515), 32.

<sup>68</sup> Martin Luther, *Tischreden. Erlanger Ausgabe der Werke Luthers*. Erlangen, 1865, vol. 24, 294.

and the University, envious of Luther's prestige at Wittenberg, accused him of dishonorable conduct. Luther, angered, responded harshly – by his own admission – too harshly. Later, when writing an apology to the elders of the Erfurt monastery, asks for their forgiveness, noting: “For my emotion, though excessive, had a just cause.”<sup>69</sup>

It can certainly be said that Luther's charismatic and passionate personality as reflected in his rhetoric was a key to his success as a reformer, but, in king David-like fashion (a biblical figure with whom he strongly associated on a personal level), he had the sense to wisely repent of those odd public statements he made that can best be described as unwise.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, it was a noble, godly passion, albeit at times misdirected, that lay at the heart even of Luther's harsher outbursts. In this regard Spalatin's praise can certainly be maintained. I regard this radically passionate character of Luther as best exemplified in what he wrote in a letter to his close friend Melanchton – a statement which, if taken purely at face value, would have to be shunned as horribly heretical soteriology and hamartiology: “God does not save fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly.”<sup>71</sup> However, when familiarizing oneself with the personality and drive of the man, one's eyes is opened to a deeper understanding of the intensity with which he experienced his struggles and coming to grips with the reality of the broken world he lived in as well as his own sinful nature and how that was reflected in rhetorically loaded statements like these made to friends like Melanchton. It further evidences Luther's passion and drive for reform and action, while lacking perhaps the finer systematic theological and doctrinal preciseness of a Calvin. Nonetheless, history has shown that this personality of Luther was exactly what was needed at the time to (re)light the fire of Reformation in Europe.

This fire that started in Luther's heart would light up Western Christendom in 1517, when he wasn't even yet 34 years old. Luther had been installed as a professor in Wittenberg in 1512, and was shortly thereafter promoted to the chair of professor of theology, where he would spend the next few years teaching on the Psalms, Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. It was during his

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<sup>69</sup> Luther, *Correspondence*, (1514), 30.

<sup>70</sup> Rix, *Martin Luther*, 11.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 501.

preparation for a lecture on Romans in 1515 that he would come to the profound insight regarding the doctrine of justification by faith that would dictate his work as theological reformer.<sup>72</sup> Part of his job was also the preparation of propositions for academic debate, and it was the second set of these that he authored that he would eventually nail on the church door in Wittenberg on 31 October, 1517, probably with the intention of inciting a debate.<sup>73</sup> Here again we see the historical significance of Luther's dynamic, fiery personality. While one would be inclined to assume this type of act to be one of open rebellion, it is likely that Luther, unable to fathom the consequences, did not, despite his dramatic course of action, intend it as such.

Luther's persecution following this revolutionary act, his defense of his doctrines at Worms and his protection by Frederick, the Prince of Saxony, has all been well documented. The profound influence of the initiator of the Reformation had after 1517 is seen in a letter written to him in 1521, shortly after he was taken by prince Frederick, by the influential German humanist, Nikolaus Gerbel. Unsure if Luther was still alive, he wrote: "...we who have aspired to salvation and freedom and have recognized in you a champion of the Gospel and of true faith, are variously affected, and you would not believe how anxious we are for your life."<sup>74</sup>

It is evident from the praise and love he received from contemporaries, that he was also a particularly likeable character. Men of stature, like prince Frederick, went out of their way, even at the risk of their own lives, to protect him, a testimony to the attractiveness of his passionate personality.

After completing a German translation of the New Testament, Luther would come out of hiding and return to Wittenberg in March 1522, where he would live out the rest of his days.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, until 1530 Luther would continue to live a life of exile, and was unable to present the Augsburg Confession with Melancthon to the German Emperor Charles V in that year.<sup>76</sup> His

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<sup>72</sup> Hendrix, *Martin Luther*, 45, 52.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>74</sup> Smith, *Luther's Correspondence*, 31.

<sup>75</sup> Mullet, *Luther*, 166.

<sup>76</sup> Andrew J. Lindsey, *The Life, Teaching and Legacy of Martin Luther*, WestBow Press: Bloomington, IN, 2013, 79-80.

years in exile bears testimony of Luther's patience, a virtue which probably didn't come naturally to him, but to which he quite successfully managed to discipline himself unto when he needed it most. In the years preceding 1530 Luther had continued his work in preaching and teaching in Wittenberg, and in 1525 married the runaway nun Catharina von Bora.<sup>77</sup> He had initially been reluctant to marry, perhaps due to caution from being branded a heretic and living with the very real threat of persecution hanging over his head.<sup>78</sup> The famous Dutch Humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus, after receiving Luther's sharp response to his defense of free will, disappointedly wrote in 1526 that he "was hoping that Luther's wife would calm her husband down".<sup>79</sup> He was evidently irritated by the fiery temperament and energetic approach with which his opponent engaged not only in battle, but in every facet of life. Catharina herself hinted in this direction, reportedly jesting a few days after the marriage: "I have to train the doctor a little differently".<sup>80</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Martin and Catharina had six children together, of which four reached adulthood. From 1530 onwards, after the success of the Diet of Augsburg, Luther's life was drastically less eventful. From 1530 Luther would dedicate himself to caring for his family, teaching at Wittenberg and producing some of his best and also most controversial theological works – a testimony that his passion never wavered. If I, like many other biographers, make myself guilty of neglecting the latter part of Luther's life, my apology would be that the purpose of this short article has specifically been to contribute this year's celebrations the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that great event on 31 October 1517 that irrevocably changed the course of world history. This latter half of his career, nonetheless, testifies of the love he had for his family in particular, but also the faithful at

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<sup>77</sup> Mullet, *Luther*, 180, 236.

<sup>78</sup> Michelle DeRusha, *Katharina and Martin: The radical Marriage of a Runaway Nun and a Renegade Monk*. Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 2017, 149.

<sup>79</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Collected Works, vol. 12: The correspondence of Erasmus*, (translated by R.J. Schoeck and B. Corrigan). University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1974 (1526), 79.

<sup>80</sup> Mickey Leland Mattox, *'Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs': Martin Luther's interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the Errationes In Genesin, 1535-45*. Brill: Leiden, 2003, 67.

Wittenberg, whom he patiently and lovingly guided as a true shepherd. This part of his career was furthermore vital for the solidification of Protestantism in Germany and the Reformation in general, and the work he passionately completed kept alive that flame, still burning today, once ignited by this German firebrand monk's bold and courageous step of 500 years ago.

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Martin Luther was a German theologian who initiated the Protestant Reformation . He defended his opinions in all the cities he visited and was investigated and to some extent persecuted, by the Christian church until Pope Leo X managed to stop him. It was a great reformer and father of the Protestant Reformation who made serious criticisms and fought against corruption within the Catholic Church during the 16th century . He was always driven to seek a merciful God, was a monk and an obedient disciple, fasted and prayed many hours a day while meditating. He was characterized by trying to make t Martin Luther biography, the story of the German monk who challenged the authority of the Church and set off the Protestant Reformation. Early Years. Luther the Monk.Â His parents were from peasant stock, but had high ambitions for their intelligent, eldest son. Martin Luther's Parents, Hans and Margarethe Luther. Luther's father, Hans, started out as a miner, but by Martin's birth had become the owner of several foundries. Young Luther was sent away to boarding schools in various towns nearby to study. The curriculum during the late Middle Ages was Latin and church liturgy and doctrine. Discipline was severe: pupils were caned for misbehavior and not learning their schoolwork. Learn about Martin Luther biography topic in details explained by subject experts on vedantu.com. Register free for online tutoring session to clear your doubts.Â Luther expressed antagonistic, aggressive views toward Jews in two of his later works, calling for the burning of their synagogues and their deaths. His rhetoric targeted not only Jews, but also Roman Catholics, Anabaptists, and nontrinitarian Christians. The ex-communication of Pope Leo X was still in effect when Luther died in 1546. Information About Martin Luther. Martin Luther Date of Birth: 10 November 1483. Place of Birth: Eisleben, County of Mansfeld, Holy Roman Empire. Death date: 18 February 1546. Martin Luther, O.S.A. (/É~luÉÊ,É™r/; German: [É^maÉtiÉn É^lÉŠtÉ] (listen); 10 November 1483 â€“ 18 February 1546) was a German professor of theology, priest, author, composer, Augustinian monk, and a seminal figure in the Reformation. Luther was ordained to the priesthood in 1507. He came to reject several teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church; in particular, he disputed the view on indulgences. Luther proposed an academic discussion of the practice and efficacy of indulgences in his Ninety Next (Martin Luther King, Jr.) Martin Luther (November 10, 1483 â€“ February 18, 1546) was the first and most prominent leader of a reform movement in sixteenth century Christianity, subsequently known as the Protestant Reformation. Essentially, Luther sought to recover core New Testament teachings that he claimed had been obscured by corruption and worldly traditions of medieval Catholicism. In particular, Luther opposed the idea, popularized by certain indulgence-sellers of his day, that one could buy