

On the Apocalyptic and Human Agency

On the Apocalyptic and Human Agency:
Conversations with Augustine of Hippo
and Martin Luther

Edited by

Kirsi Stjerna and Deanna A. Thompson

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P U B L I S H I N G

On the Apocalyptic and Human Agency:
Conversations with Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther,
Edited by Kirsi Stjerna and Deanna A. Thompson

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Dedicated to Dr. Hans J. Hillerbrand, Professor Emeritus, Duke University, President of the American Academy of Religion in 2004, founder of the “Martin Luther and Global Lutheran Traditions” program unit in 2008, a colleague, mentor and friend.

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FOREWORD

KIRSI STJERNA

Who is in charge of our lives and destinies? What choices are ours to make in respect to the wellbeing of the human race and the creation? How do we comprehend the “end” or “ends” of this life, in this world as we know it in human time? With life and death issues, where is hope?

With questions like these, we continue to walk in the footsteps of Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther, whether in agreement or disagreement with their solutions, or simply curious about their discoveries.

There is little doubt about the fundamental importance of Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther for Western theology and anthropology. Both men have proven the test of time and continue to invite critical debate, as followers continue to identify themselves as “Augustinians” and “Lutherans” (with quite a variety in what such identities entail). Their relentless passion for the existential questions and searching for spiritual truths is contagious. (As a testimony to that: give a student a copy of Augustine’s *Confessions* or Luther’s *On Freedom of a Christian*, for instance, and you can witness new friendships being formed.) Fallible and undeniably human, the theologians separated by centuries from one another and from our times continue to engage new generations with their existential questions about human beings’ destiny and options and sources of hope. They have set forth models that intrigue contemporary scholars who desire to conjoin intellectual and spiritual, to “do theology” in the midst of life, and to have an impact on real life issues.

It is not insignificant that the largest international association for religious scholars, the American Academy of Religion, hosts two independent groups dedicated to work with Augustine and Luther. *The Martin Luther and the Global Lutheran Traditions* Group was launched in 2008 and, per its published rationale, “seeks to provide an avenue for a comprehensive conversation on both Lutheran history and thought in the global context. In so doing, it is able to draw on an immensely rich tradition that goes far beyond Lutheran parochial interests as it includes the relationship to other Christian traditions as well as cultures in the global South.”

The Steering Committee (incoming and outgoing members in 2012-2014) included Deanna A. Thompson, Vitor Westhelle and Kirsi Stjerna as co-chairs, Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth, Kris Kvam, Hans Schwarz, Anthony Bateza, Allen Jorgenson, and Euan Cameron. *The Augustine and Augustinianism Group* “provides a forum for the historical and constructive study of issues relating to the thought of Augustine, including how it was received in various eras and how it might be a resource for religious thought today.”ⁱⁱ The Steering Committee (incoming and outgoing members in 2012-2014) included Paul Kolbet and Kari Kloos as co-chairs, Eric Gregory, Kim Paffenroth, Robert Kennedy, Phillip Cary, James Wetzel, Matthew Drewer, and Tarmo Toom. It was formed in 2001 with Charles Mathewes and Kim Paffenroth as co-chairs. The book at hand is a fruit of the labors of these two groups.

This book is written by scholars who presented from their original work at the American Academy of Religion in Baltimore in 2013. The first part of the book, “Luther and the Apocalyptic,” consists of the presentations given at the similarly-named session hosted by *The Martin Luther and the Global Traditions Group*. This set of articles is introduced by Deanna A. Thompson, the co-editor of this volume, and the co-chair of the Group since its founding days (2008-2013). The second half of the book, “Augustine and Luther on Human Agency,” features presentations from the session co-hosted with *The Augustine and Augustinianisms Group*. These articles are introduced by Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth, who initially connected the two groups with one another.

The contributors represent different institutions, disciplines and areas of expertise, and authors explore methodologically new journeys to take and fresh arguments to test. The selection for the respective panels took place through the normal AAR processes of blind peer reviews of written proposals. The chapters in this book preserve the order in which the papers were presented. In the editing-for-publication process some of the presentations were expanded. The style, arguments, and sources used by the author are preserved without a forced effort to unify. Instead of a bibliography for the whole, each article has its own sources fully cited in the endnotes. Each article is its own entity and thus any of the articles can be read independently. For the full effect, of course, the reader will want to indulge in all the articles.

The papers have been edited by Deanna A. Thompson (Part One) and Kirsi Stjerna (Part Two), who served as Co-Chairs of the Steering Group of *The Martin Luther and the Global Traditions* during 2011-2013 and during the planning and execution of the respective panels.

We are most grateful and excited that the Cambridge Scholars Press invited us to present the academy papers in a book format. Our sincere thanks to Amanda Millar, the Typesetting Manager, and to Samuel Baker, the Commissioning Editor at the Cambridge Scholars Press, for guiding this project to its completion, and to the design team for the cover. Thanks to Wendy Werdin, the Hamline University Faculty Secretary, for her assistance with editing and formatting, and the Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary's A.R. Wentz Library and Katy Giebenhain, Communications Associate, for providing images for the cover.

We wish to acknowledge the members of the respective steering committees for their work for the academy and for their expansive scholarly vision. We hope the book finds its way to many classrooms around the world, to stir further conversations with Augustine and Luther.

This book is dedicated to Dr. Hans J. Hillerbrand, the founder of *The Martin Luther and the Global Traditions*, and the President of AAR in 2004, as an expression of deep gratitude for his vision, leadership, and multi-faceted contribution in the expansive field of Reformation Studies.

Notes

ⁱ <https://www.aarweb.org/node/261>

PART I:

LUTHER AND THE APOCALYPTIC

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: LUTHER AND THE APOCALYPTIC

DEANNA A. THOMPSON

As the scholars writing for this volume gathered in Baltimore in November 2013 at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion for a session on “Luther and Apocalyptic,” the number of people dead in the Philippines from Typhoon Haiyan hit 5000, a deadly earthquake raged in the South Atlantic, and large-scale violence continued in Iraq and Syria. Sitting together in a conference room we began with an invocation of these global events to signal that apocalyptic thinking is not merely a topic for academic papers. Indeed, the time in which we live continues to breed apocalyptic visions not only in religious communities but also in the broader culture, where movies, TV shows, and internet sites about apocalypses—most recently of the zombie variety—proliferate. What might a reform-minded theologian, pastor, and teacher living five hundred years ago have to say that could illumine our perspective on apocalyptic thinking today?

In the sixteenth century context in which he lived, Martin Luther was deeply engaged in apocalyptic thinking. Political instabilities at home and abroad, the constancy of life-threatening diseases, and ecclesiastical tumult all contributed to Luther’s sense of the world’s uncertain status. He believed the world would end soon. Yet what we see in Luther is a setting forth of an apocalyptic sensibility that identifies God’s veiled presence amid the world’s undoing in a way that reorients our attention not toward a future cataclysmic end as much as toward veiled signs of resurrection in the bodies of the present.

Almost five hundred years distant, similar threats loom on our horizon. In the middle spaces of uncertainty, we see in the essays of this section scholars who turn back to Luther’s uncovering of under-appreciated biblical and doctrinal space for apocalyptic reflection. Each of the papers in this section wrestles creatively with how Luther’s apocalyptic sensibility

shed light on where hope emerges amid our precarious and resilient existence.

While apocalyptic thinking often drives toward images of violent endings, the authors gathered here draw on Luther's deep groundedness in the this-worldly dimensions of his apocalyptic thinking. His apocalyptic worldview led him back to the earth, to living and dead bodies, to the political realities of his day, to glimpses of hope amid the tumult. Each author in this section utilizes dimensions of Luther's apocalyptic sensibility that continue to help all of us better envision how God's future impacts the here and now.

Moving beyond medieval methods for interpreting Scripture, Luther's reading of the political signs of his time alongside biblical prophecy leads him to an innovative, pastoral approach to apocalyptic, according to Robert Smith in his essay, "Luther's Pastoral Apocalyptic." While Luther's view of the rising military threat of the Turks includes some anti-Islamic components standard for his day, Smith highlights that Luther's pastoral sensibilities about how religion shapes human lives leads him to surprisingly progressive positions regarding the beauty of Islamic practice and the importance for Christians to have access to the Qur'an. Smith details how Luther's reading of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation in light of both the Turkish military threat as well as the abuses of the Roman church shapes his pastoral approach to hope, where Christ—not the Nation state—is the defeater of the anti-Christ. Smith then proposes a contemporary Christian reclaiming of Luther's "non-nationalist, scripture-based, Gospel-grounded" view of apocalyptic hope that also includes a charitable view of Islam.

That the concept of *place* occupies an important dimension in Luther's apocalyptic worldview is explored by author Allen G. Jorgenson in his essay "Luther on 1 Corinthians 15: From Eschaton to Eschata." Jorgenson's focus on place comes by way of attending first to the perspective of the Haudenosaunee, the first peoples of Southwestern Ontario, Canada, where Jorgenson lives and works. Rather than viewing Luther's reflections on 1 Corinthians 15 through a modern lens where eschatology is read primarily in linear, historical terms, Jorgenson maps Luther's view of Paul's images of Christ as first fruit that lead to views of cemeteries as fields of kernels leading to the image that Christian life is finally about germination. To be little Christs is to be *eschata*, germinating close to the wounds of the world, inextricably bound to all elements of creation and its cyclical nature.

Even though Luther believed we know less about life after death than an unborn child *in utero* knows about life beyond the womb, he

nevertheless engaged in innovative theological reflection on life beyond death, as James Kroemer details in his essay, “‘Doctor Martin, Get Up’: Luther’s View of Life After Death.” Chronicling Luther’s gradual rejection of the concept of purgatory in favor of the conviction that souls sleep until the Day of Judgment, Kroemer demonstrates that rather than advancing a tidy soul/body dualism, Luther values their unity with his insistence that the soul cannot get to heaven without the body. Through careful analysis of Luther’s biblical commentary on 1 Corinthians, Genesis and beyond, Kroemer suggests that Luther’s view of the dead as “sleeping” until their resurrection is a view that raises important questions for contemporary funeral rites.

For Vitor Westhelle in his essay “Luther and the Apocalyptic,” the apocalyptic intimation in Luther’s work is not something that appears toward the end of the Reformer’s life in his rants against his enemies. Analyzing Luther’s *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* of 1528, Westhelle argues that the third mode of Christ’s presence articulated here is a powerful window into Luther’s apocalyptic view. That Christ is present everywhere in all things “even according to his humanity” grounds Luther’s view of divine revelation in all things mundane and ordinary. At the same time, Westhelle shows us that for Luther, there is always an ambivalence in that presence. The unveiling is also always a veiling. Westhelle links Luther’s views of the hidden God with Jewish apocalypses of the early inter-testamental period, where opposites coincide. There, in the world’s crucible, God’s veiled presence in the midst of pain and death wrests from it all the promise of resurrection.

So how does our eschatology need to be transformed, and how can Luther help us? This is the question that New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing asks of the perspectives offered in this section in her response to all of them. Through engaging interaction with each of the authors, Rossing brings insights from her own work on biblical apocalyptic to bear on the question of transforming apocalyptic with the help of Luther. She delves even more deeply into Luther’s interpretations of Pauline texts, suggesting several places where even more ecologically-oriented eschatology might be possible. She reminds us of places where Luther needs critiquing (such as in his participation in Christianity’s long history of vilification of “the enemy” through images of the anti-Christ) and commends the creative this-worldly, spatially oriented analyses provided regarding the applicability of Luther’s apocalyptic insights for rethinking eschatology in our time and place.

We invite you into these essays on Luther and apocalyptic, and to engaging the question Rossing asks above. Join the conversation. Our world needs your response.

CHAPTER TWO

PROPHECY, THE POPE, AND THE TURK: LUTHER'S PASTORAL APOCALYPTIC

ROBERT O. SMITH

1517 saw both the Ottoman takeover of Jerusalem and Cairo from the Mamluks and the distribution of the *Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, written as a service to Pope Leo X by the young monk, Martin Luther. These events would shape the coming Protestant Reformation. The Ottoman Empire, under the leadership of Suleiman I, would soon extend into Europe and lay siege to Vienna, Austria. This gathering military threat provided one aspect of the theopolitical context for Luther's vocations—biblical commentator, professor, social analyst, and preaching minister, among others—as well as a distraction for the papal authorities bent on silencing his dissent. For Luther and the evangelical community that formed around him, the sixteenth century was an apocalyptic time, a revealing moment within history when the call of the Gospel was clear. This climate resulted in a rich output of apocalyptic and polemical imagery.

Believing that the biblical prophets “bear witness to the kingdom of Christ in which we now live,” Luther found in them “strong comfort and comforting strength.” Luther’s approach—what might be described as pastoral apocalyptic—informed his interpretations of both scripture and history, especially the eminent threats of the Pope and the Turk. Luther was able to move beyond constructions of the Turk as a mere military threat to a consideration of Islam itself—or, at least, to the point where he advocated study of the best available sources of knowledge regarding Islam, if only so its claims could be more ably refuted.

This presentation will focus on 1) how Luther understood and responded to Islam, 2) his contextual identification of the Antichrist, 3) Luther’s apocalyptic use of Scripture, and 4) what this might mean for Protestant (not just Lutheran) engagement with apocalyptic hope today.

Responding to the Ottoman Threat

George Forell observed that “war against the Turks formed the colorful background of the Reformation.”¹ What Lebanese scholar Nabil Matar has called the “Turko-Catholic threat”² provided evangelical Christians with a sharpened calling. Long-standing Christian conflict with Islam, a central force in the development of Christian identities in the West as well as the East, was heightened by effective Ottoman military power. Protestant discourse would soon join anxiety about Islam to vitriol against the civil and theological authority of the Roman Catholic Church. This joint threat was both martial and theological, with both enemies threatening the body as well as the soul.

Like most sixteenth-century Europeans aware of political realities beyond their towns, Luther’s consciousness was informed by views of “The Turk.” Along with major writings focused on the Ottoman threat,³ his occasional writings and Table Talk are filled with asides and references to the Turk. His first mention of the Turk in his public writings comes in 1518 with his “Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses.” There, in reference to the fifth thesis,⁴ Luther articulates a theological perspective on the Turkish threat that he will hold until his final writings on the subject. In a section discussing “punishment” that is “God’s correction and scourging,” Luther asserts that, as with the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:6–10), only repentance can still God’s chastising rod. But “the ‘big wheels’ in the church” who would preach a crusade against the Turks “want to fight, not against iniquities, but against the lash of iniquity and thus they would oppose God who says that through that lash he himself punishes us for our iniquities because we do not punish ourselves for them.”⁵

Luther’s explanation was singled out for condemnation in *Exsurge Domine*, the papal bull of excommunication directed at Luther by Pope Leo X on 15 June 1520. Among the “destructive, pernicious, scandalous, and seductive” errors enumerated in the bull is an essentialized version of Luther’s position: “To go to war against the Turks is to resist God who punishes our iniquities through them.”⁶ But even before *Exsurge Domine*, Luther tied his struggles with Rome to the war against the Turk. Prior to the beginning of the Leipzig Debate with Johannes Eck in June 1519, Luther wrote to his friend Wencenlaus Linck, “I think I can demonstrate that today Rome is worse than the Turk.”⁷

After the fall of Belgrade in 1521, polemical exposés on the Turks and Islam—*Türkenbüchlein*—began to flood German lands.⁸ While suspicious of papal aims and authority vis-à-vis the question of war against the Turk,⁹ Luther’s own 1529 writings, *On War Against the Turk* and *Military*

Sermon Against the Turks were contributions to this genre. The Second Diet of Speyer in 1529 was called to set policy toward both the Ottoman threat and the religious controversies racing through the Christian empire. Since, as Archduke Ferdinand declared, “the fact that the Turks were advancing up the Danube had much to do with God’s anger over the existence of heretics within the empire,” both “the Turks and Luther were to be dealt with summarily.”¹⁰

Although he refused to support a general crusade, Luther did not reject all military action against Ottoman opponents. In his 1528 “Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors,” Luther wrote that “Since the authorities are... to make defense against those who would destroy the worship of God, the peaceful order of the country, law, and justice,... we are to defend ourselves against the Turks.”¹¹ Further, Luther recommended in May 1538 that the Protestant princes go unconditionally to the aid of Charles V and his fight against the Turkish threat, “for necessity has no law. Where there is need, there is an end to what law, alliance, or treaty says. The need supersedes everything.”¹²

Comprehending Islam

Wars are best fought against contorted opponents. In the Reformation era, the Turk could be constructed and encountered in purely military or political terms. A nuanced understanding of Islam was not required to muster the dehumanizing impulse required for combat. Instead of personal attacks on Muhammad, the founding prophet of Islam, Luther’s focus was on doctrine: “Personally,” he said, “the teachings of Muhammad don’t move me, but the doctrines of the Turks we must engage. One must consider dogma.”¹³

Whether or not Suleiman’s forces could overrun Vienna and take western Europe, Luther was convinced that the best sources should be available for Europeans to understand Islam. This was not for the vague appreciation of an exotic other, but for the edification of Christians as they faced potential life under Ottoman rule. In this vein, he recommended *Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum*, originally written around 1481. In sharp contrast to most *Türkenbüchlein* available at the time, *Libellus* sought to relate “details so as not only to recount the evils of the Turks but also to exhibit alongside them the best things.”¹⁴ As he wrote in the preface to *Libellus*, “Those who only censure and condemn the base and absurd characteristics of the enemy but remain silent about matters that are honest and worthy of praise do more harm than good to their cause.” To that end, Luther observed that “the religion of the Turks or Muhammad is

far more splendid in ceremonies—and, I might say, in customs—than ours, even including that of the religious or all the clerics.... Not even true Christians, not Christ himself, not the apostles or prophets ever exhibited so great a display.” His critique of Islam is doctrinal rather than political since “the gospel teaches that the Christian religion is something other and more sublime than showy ceremonies ... far something other than good customs or good works.”¹⁵ Luther closes his preface with a willingness to further engage the sources and teachings of Islam: “Perhaps I will say more, if ever I get my hands on that Muhammad and his Qur’an.”¹⁶ Luther would have a hand in making sure that the latter of these came into his possession.

When a re-edited version of the 1143 interpretation of the Qur’an in Latin by Robert of Ketton was submitted for publication in 1543, the Basel city council was divided on whether or not the book should be allowed within the city walls. As the publisher, Johannes Oporinus, wrote, “the magistracy is afraid that if so pestiferous a book is published, the sky will fall.” The tension was not eased until an influential outsider, Martin Luther, wrote a letter in support of the project. Luther’s letter is unequivocal in his derision of the teachings of the Qur’an and in his insistence that a translation should be available so “pastors have a true witness to the people for preaching the abomination of Mohammad through which they should become the more inimical to him and strengthened in our Christian belief.”¹⁷ The Basel magistrates indignantly accepted Luther’s demands.¹⁸

An item from Luther’s Table Talk appears to show that Ottomans were also interested in learning more about Luther. A member of an imperial mission to the Turks reported to Luther that Suleiman had shown much interest in Luther and his movement and that he had asked the ambassador Luther’s age. When they told him that Luther was forty-eight years old, he responded, “I wish he were even younger, he would know in me a gracious protector [*einen gnedigen herrn*].” But hearing that report Luther made the sign of the cross saying, “May God protect me from such a gracious protector!”¹⁹

The Dual Antichrist

The Turko-Catholic context of the Protestant Reformation is signified most clearly in Luther’s conflation of the Pope and the Turk as the Antichrist, the singular character of Christian apocalyptic expectation. Robin Barnes has observed of that milieu that the “crux of all that was new in Luther’s reading of biblical prophecy, and the most influential of all his

prophetic discoveries, was his identification of the Antichrist with the papacy at Rome.”²⁰ In his 1535 lectures on Genesis, Luther played with identifying the Antichrist, skirting up to the edge of conflating pope and Turk, but in the end, staying with the pope alone: “The Antichrist, that is the pope and Turk,” he says, “elevate themselves... above God in the category of relation, who is the God proclaimed by the Word and manifested by the worship.” Luther then backs away from this functional conflation: “Yet it is more in accordance with the truth to say that the Turk is the beast, because he is outside the church and openly persecutes Christ. The Antichrist, however, sits in the temple of God. Therefore, strictly speaking and by logical definition, he who sits in the church is the Antichrist.”²¹

Luther was not always so nuanced. During a lecture on Genesis 9, Luther opined: “They know our verdict about them, namely, that we regard and condemn both the pope and the Turk as the very Antichrist.”²² In 1529, he had proclaimed that “The Turk fills heaven with Christians by murdering their bodies, but the pope does what he can to fill hell with Christians through his blasphemous teachings.”²³ In the Table Talk, Luther speculates regarding the origin of these two threats, asserting that “Pope and Turk started out at the same time under emperor Phokas, about nine hundred years ago.”²⁴ He went even further: “The person of the Antichrist is the pope, his flesh is the Turk. The one has infested the Church spiritually, the other bodily. However, both come from the same lord, even the devil.”²⁵

Luther’s identification of the pope as the Antichrist reached a crescendo in 1537. In the *Smalcald Articles*, Luther asserts that the pope’s desire to unite all of Christendom under the authority of his headship “shows overwhelmingly that he is the true end-times Antichrist” since, in doing so, the pope sets himself over God. The Turks, “despite being great enemies of the Christians,” compare more favorably since they “allow whoever desires it to have faith in Christ.”²⁶

The joint threat from Turk and pope is addressed by Luther in the church’s collective song. His hymn, *Erhalt uns Herr bey deinem Wort* (Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word), was produced in 1541/42 and collected in Klug’s Wittenberg hymnal of 1543. As Francis I of France joined forces with the Sultan against the Empire and threats against the Lutheran were again growing, the first verse of the hymn, originally designated a children’s song, takes on special immediacy: “Lord, keep us steadfast in thy Word/And curb the Turks’ and papists’ sword [murdering]/Who Jesus Christ, your only Son /would tumble from your throne.”²⁷

Whatever his concerns regarding the Antichrist, Luther was confident that God was sovereign in worldly affairs and that the chastening rod could yet be removed from the Ottoman hand. It is this conviction that animates Luther's later writing:

Heavenly Father, we have indeed deserved your punishment. But execute the punishment yourself according to your grace and not your wrath. It is better to be in your punishing hands [*in deiner hende staupe uns geben*] than in the hands of men or enemies.... But you know, Almighty God, Father, that we have not sinned against devil, pope, and Turk and they have no right against us or power over us to punish us. But you can use them as your harsh rod [*grimmegen Ruten*] against us, who have sinned against you and deserved all this misfortune²⁸

Christian hope was strong. Although "the Turkish religion and the papacy are most powerful monsters" Luther proclaimed that "the Word and the sacraments remain, faith and the church remain in spite of the pope and the Turk."²⁹

Apocalyptic Interpretation of the Bible, Islam, and History

Luther approached his primary vocation as a Bible scholar through a pastoral lens. These commitments merged with his identification of the Turk and Pope as antichristian threats to faithful people. During the 1530 imperial Diet of Augsburg, Luther was housed north of Nürnberg in the Coburg Castle so he might more easily be consulted by his colleagues. Suleiman had commenced his siege of Vienna in September 1529; organizing support for defensive efforts was the Diet's main purpose.³⁰ Luther's primary purpose during his time in the "wilderness" was translating portions of the Bible into the German vernacular. His first finished product was a translation and short commentary on Ezekiel 39–40, in which Luther interpreted Ezekiel's apocalyptic "Gog" and "Magog" to be the Ottoman Empire. His hope was that "all the faithful might... draw courage and comfort from this passage."³¹

In 1532, Luther published a complete translation of the prophets under the title, *Die Propheten alle deutsch*. The preface he wrote for that collection, included in the complete *Deutsche Bibel* (1545), extended Luther's pastoral concern. Believing that the prophets "bear witness to the kingdom of Christ in which we now live," Luther found in them "strong comfort and comforting strength":

By them our Christian faith is greatly comforted in the confidence that before God it is the right station or stance [*stand*], over against all other wrong, false, human holiness and sects. For these all are a source of great offense and affliction [*anfechten*] to a weak heart.... So, in our days, the sects of the Turk, the pope, and others are great and powerful snares.

Luther's approach—what might be described as pastoral apocalypticism—informed his interpretations of both scripture and history, especially the eminent threats of the pope and the Turk.³²

In addition to calming the disquiet of believers weathering difficult times, Luther employed apocalyptic literature to interpret the times themselves. His 1530 translation of Daniel included a preface and a dedicatory letter to John Frederick of Saxony indicating Luther's belief that the world would soon end.³³ The preface identified the fourth beast of Daniel with the Roman empire and the small, arrogant horn (Dan. 7:8) as Islam: this "little horn will fight the saints and blaspheme Christ, something that we are all experiencing and seeing before our very eyes... Certainly we have nothing to wait for now except the Last Day." Nevertheless, the Roman Empire will remain until the end, "even though many monarchs may have risen against the German empire and the Turks may rage against it." This is so, Luther says, because "Daniel does not lie, and up until now experience...has borne this out."³⁴ The trustworthiness of prophetic scripture provides the assurance of this interpretation: although enemies are at the gates, the empire in which we live cannot fail until it is defeated by Christ himself. This vision is cold comfort for those invested in perpetuating the empire, but a salve to common people struggling in their daily lives.

In the history of Protestant hermeneutics in the apocalyptic key, Revelation strikes the tonic while other sources provide the polyphony. Luther's initial dismissal of Revelation as useful for the Christian life is therefore noteworthy. In his 1522 preface to Revelation, Luther wrote that he "can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it" and did not "think highly of it" because "Christ is neither taught nor known in it."³⁵ By 1530, Luther's views on Revelation were dramatically different. Although his estimation of Revelation had grown, he was aware that interpreting the book could lead to pitfalls: "Many have tried their hands at it, but until this very day they have attained no certainty. Some have even brewed into it many stupid things out of their own heads."³⁶

Crafted in the crucible of 1530, Luther's second interpretation of Revelation resonates with the pastoral apocalypticism of his work with Ezekiel and Daniel. Presuming his times to be the future period described in Revelation, Luther found his Catholic and Muslim enemies throughout

the text. He interprets the angels and woes of Revelation 10 and 11, for instance, as referring to “the shameful Mohammed with his companions, the Saracens, who inflicted great plagues on Christendom, with his doctrines and with the sword.” With this angel, Luther continues, comes “the holy papacy... a counterfeit church of external holiness.” The final plague that will afflict the church “in the East is the second woe, Mohammed and the Saracens; here in the West are papacy and empire, with the third woe. To these is added for good measure the Turk, Gog and Magog, as will follow in chapter 20.” After this final spasm of wrath, Revelation is filled “almost exclusively images of comfort, telling of the end of all these woes and abominations.” This comfort was derived from the final defeat of God’s enemies. “With this kind of interpretation,” Luther says, believers “can rest assured that neither force nor lies, neither wisdom nor holiness, neither tribulation nor suffering shall suppress Christendom, but it will gain the victory and conquer at last.”³⁷

Luther’s use of history as a lens for interpreting scripture marked a substantial departure from medieval methods. According to historian Jaroslav Pelikan, “Medieval hermeneutics was dominated by a reliance on, and a quest for, the multiple sense of Scripture”: the literary, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. Pelikan saw in Luther’s hermeneutics a “repudiation of allegorism.” In its place, Protestant exegesis emphasized the grammatical, the literal, the historical, and, only in very limited cases, the allegorical senses of scripture.³⁸ Avihu Zakai has asserted that forms of scriptural interpretation put forth by Luther and Philip Melancthon “marked the creation of a Protestant ideology of history,” a new “Protestant historiography” which transformed “the role which the world and secular history assumed in sacred, providential history.”³⁹

Lutheran readings of history through lenses provided by apocalyptic texts had a direct influence on English Protestants exiled during the religious upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Luther’s prefaces to Revelation, in particular, provided inspiration to English writers, who in some cases included Luther in their interpretations of history and text.⁴⁰ There were, however, significant differences in the appropriations of scripture, especially Revelation, between Lutherans and their English guests, differences not fully explained by the English theologians’ simultaneous engagement with Reformed thinkers led by Calvin and Theodore Bèza.

These differences seem to spring from the relationship of English Protestant faith to particular elements in the development of English nationalism. As it had with Luther, historicist apocalypticism provided

English Protestants with a vital tool for anti-Catholic polemics. Bernard McGinn has noted that “Nowhere was Revelation more avidly studied and more vociferously debated than in Reformation England.” Focused on identifying “the papacy itself (along with the dread Turk)” as “the institutional embodiment of the Antichrist,” Judeo-centric prophecy interpretation informed the “close linkage established between English national identity and the cause of the Reformation.”⁴¹ As I have argued elsewhere,⁴² the blend of English nationalism with Judeo-centric prophecy interpretation laid the foundations for Christian Zionism, an anti-Catholic and anti-Islamic intellectual tradition with direct implications for contemporary Christian politics.

Reclaiming Apocalyptic Hope

In contemporary North America, apocalyptic hope is most often associated with Protestant evangelicals and fundamentalists, not the “mainline” churches most often associated with Lutheranism. Reclaiming apocalyptic hope, however, may be a step toward re-imagining Lutheran traditions in North America and around the globe.

Lutheranism is a non-nationalist, scripture-based and Gospel-grounded tradition. It was not by accident that Luther’s first translations toward his German Bible were from Ezekiel, even as the young evangelical movement was under attack by both the Ottoman Empire and the imperial church. In those prophecies, Luther found “strong comfort and comforting strength.” Those gifts are available to twenty-first century Lutherans as well, if only we refuse to allow those forms of reading to not be appropriated by those who have brewed into apocalyptic scripture “many stupid things out of their own heads.”⁴³ To do so, however, will take courage to stand against the forms of biblical interpretation that have become dominant in our time.

From a theological perspective, how do we respond when apocalyptic hope is used not by oppressed, marginal groups, but by representatives of the Christian community situated firmly in centers of privilege and power? What does it mean that, in our time, the apocalyptic visions of Daniel and Revelation and Ezekiel—all written to sustain the weary with a word of hope—have been taken over by those in power, and have become a tool of empire, an apologia for imperialism? What does it mean when we forget that Martin Luther had a vital, apocalyptic hope that informed his faith and drove his action throughout his life?

Luther’s witness vis-à-vis Islam is borne out of his apocalyptic confidence that Christ will be all in all. There is no hesitation, therefore, to

let truth be seen in the light of day. History shows us that when the apocalyptic is appropriated by empire, it is a simple task to mobilize Christian theology to fight against the enemies of geopolitical interests. By promoting the most charitable presentations of Islam and Muslims, Luther shows us how we can enter current political debates with our ethical traditions intact, supporting what is necessary but refusing to bear false witness against our neighbors near and far. In this confidence we will find “strong comfort and comforting strength”.

Notes

¹ George W. Forell, “Luther and the War against the Turks,” *Church History* 14:4 (December 1945), 256.

² Nabil Matar, “The Idea of the Restoration of the Jews in English Protestant Thought: From the Reformation until 1660,” *The Durham University Journal* 78 (Dec. 1985): 25. See also C.A. Patrides, “‘The Bloody and Cruell Turke’: The Background of a Renaissance Commonplace,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 10 (1963), 130.

³ *On War Against the Turk* (1529), intended to help Christians fight against the threat with good conscience (LW 46:157–205); *Heerpredigt wider den Türken* (*Military Sermon Against the Turks*, 1529), with an exposition of Daniel 7, Luther attempted to explain the Turkish threat in all its seriousness (WA 30/2:160–197); *Vorwort zu dem Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (Preface to *Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum*, 1530), a preface to a small book written around 1481 to detail the religion and customs of the Turks; such information was in great demand given the Ottoman threat to Vienna (WA 30/2:205–208); *Admonition to Prayer Against the Turks* (1541), in which Luther’s concern for Christian penitence and prayer to counteract foreign military threat finds fullest expression (LW 43:215–241); *Verlegung des Alcoran Bruder Richardi, Prediger Ordens* (*Refutation of the Alcoran of Brother Richard, Preaching Order*, 1542), Luther’s German translation of a popular medieval polemical tract against Islam (WA 53:272–396); and the *Vorrede zu Theodor Biblianders Koranausgabe* (*Preface to Theodor Bibliander’s Edition of the Qur’an*, 1543, WA 53:569–572).

⁴ “The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons” (LW 31:89).

⁵ “Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses” (1518), LW 31:90–2/WA 1:535.

⁶ *Bulla Exsurge Domine*, 15 June 1520: “Proeliari adversus Turcas est repugnare Deo visitanti iniquitates nostras.”

⁷ WA Br 1:270, cited in James M. Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer: The Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 135.

⁸ For a cross-section and contextual analysis of this genre in its Evangelical and Roman Catholic expressions, see John W. Bohnstedt, “The Infidel Scourge of God: The Turkish Menace as Seen by the German Pamphleteers of the Reformation Era,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 58:9 (December 1968).

⁹ Luther intimated in 1520 that the main purpose for the pope's support for a war against the Turks was fundraising: "When they pretend that they are about to fight the Turks, they send out emissaries to raise money." However, "everybody knows that not a cent of the annates, or of the indulgence money, or of all the rest, is spent to fight the Turk. It all goes into their bottomless bag. They lie and deceive. They make laws and they make agreements with us, but they do not intend to keep a single letter of them" (*To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*, LW 44:144). Again in 1521, answering the articles of *Exsurge Domine*, he wrote that "God does not demand crusades, indulgences, and war. He wants us to live good lives. But the pope and his followers run from goodness faster than from anything else, yet he wants to devour the Turk" (*Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, LW 32:90).

¹⁰ Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer*, 220.

¹¹ *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony* (1528), LW 40:306.

¹² *WA Br* 10, 20, cited in Kittleson, 279.

¹³ "Personalialia, quae dicunt de Mahomet, me non movent, aber die lehre der Turken müssen wir angreifen. Dogma muss man ansehen." *WA TR* 5:221 (5536).

¹⁴ Sarah Henrich and James L. Boyce, "Martin Luther—Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam: *Preface to the Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (1530), and *Preface to Bibliander's Edition of the Qur'an* (1543)," in *Word & World* 16:2 (1996), 258. Translations of the two prefaces discussed in this section are taken from this publication.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 259, 262.

¹⁷ Cited in Clark, "Publication of the Koran," 9, 11.

¹⁸ Luther's response to their publication approval included mention that he had prepared a preface for the volume. Additionally, the text was preceded by a "Warning to the Reader" penned by Phillip Melanchthon, in which he detailed the doctrinal errors in the text. Three printings of the volume were produced by Oporinus in 1543; by 1550 it was a regular item in his catalog. The Arabic Qur'an was not printed until 150 years later; it is significant that "it is again a Lutheran theologian, Abraham Hinckelmann," who achieved this landmark. See Johannes Wallmann, "Luther on Jews and Islam," in *Creative Biblical Exegesis: Christian and Jewish Hermeneutics through the Centuries*, ed., Benjamin Uffenheimer and Henning Graf Reventlow, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 59 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 155.

¹⁹ "Behut mich Gott fur diesem gnedigen herrn!" *WA TR* 2:508 (2537b).

²⁰ Robin Bruce Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 42.

²¹ *LW* 3:121, 122.

²² *LW* 2:281.

²³ *War Sermon Against the Turk* (1529), *WA* 30:2, 195, cited in Forell, *Faith Active in Love*, 174.

²⁴ *WA TR* 3:173 (3104b).

²⁵ *WA TR* 3:158 (3055a): “Corpus Antichristi est simul papa et Turca, quia corpus constituitur corpore et anima. Spiritus Antichristi est papa, caro eius Turca, qui corporaliter infestat ecclesiam, ille spiritualiter. Sunt tamen ambo ex uno domino, Diabolo, cum papa sit mendax et homicida Turca.” And then again in 3055b: “Spiritus Antichristi est papa, caro Antichristi est Turca, quia hic ecclesiam spiritualiter, ille corporaliter devastate.”

²⁶ Martin Luther, *The Smalcald Articles* (1537), *BC* 308–9.9–14. On comparisons of pope and Turk, cf. *BC* 225.18. The 1537 edition appeared with Philip Melancthon’s *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*. Melancthon asserted that “the marks of the Antichrist clearly fit the reign of the pope and his minions.” Even if there were scriptural foundations to honor the pope, “obedience is still not owed him” when the Gospel is contradicted. “Indeed, it is necessary to oppose him as the Antichrist.” See Philip Melancthon, *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* (1537), 337.39, 339.57.

²⁷ *WA* 35:467–8/*LW* 53:304–305. The *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) version of the verse is modified: “Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word/Curb those who by deceit or sword/Would wrest the kingdom from your Son/And bring to naught all he has done” (trans., Catherine Winkworth).

²⁸ *Admonition to Prayer Against the Turks* (1541), *WA* 51:608/*LW* 43:232.

²⁹ *LW* 3:37. See also *LW* 4:29.

³⁰ See “The Augsburg Confession,” in *BC* 30–31.1.

³¹ E. Theodore Bachmann, “Introduction” to Martin Luther, “On Translating: An Open Letter (1530),” *LW* 35:175. The text of the pamphlet is reproduced at *WA* 30^{II}, (220) 223–236.

³² More recently, Lutheran biblical scholars have reemphasized pastoral apocalypticism. As Craig R. Koester says, “Revelation warns readers not to be deceived into despair.” This insight can “provide a helpful alternative to reading Revelation without either dismissing its message or reducing it to a code.” See *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 12. A similar approach is taken by Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004).

³³ See *LW* 35:294, n. 142. Luther later prepared an extensive, heavily anti-papist commentary on Daniel 12 (*WA*, DB 6, lxxxix).

³⁴ Luther, *Preface to the Prophet Daniel* (1530), *LW* 35:300, 296.

³⁵ Luther, *Preface to the Revelation of St. John* (1522), *LW* 35:398, 399. This shorter preface was included in editions of Luther’s New Testament translation from 1522 to 1527; it was superseded by the preface written in 1530.

³⁶ Luther, “Preface to the Revelation of St. John (1530/1546),” *LW* 35:400. This new preface appeared in all following editions of the *Deutsche Bibel*. Citations are from the 1546 edition of the Bible.

³⁷ Luther, *Preface to the Revelation of St. John*, *LW* 35:404–405, 406–407, 408, 409, 411.

³⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Reformation of the Bible, The Bible of the Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 28–29.