

4-1-2014

Warrior Saints: Warfare and Violence in Martin Luther's Readings of Some Old Testament Texts

Mickey Mattox

Marquette University, mickey.mattox@marquette.edu

Warrior Saints: Warfare and Violence in Martin Luther's Readings of Some Old Testament Texts

Mickey L. Mattox

It is a story Lutherans love to tell. In early 1535, answering a request from his barber Peter Beskendorf, a man he had known since 1517 and considered a close friend, Martin Luther brought forth a sweet and practical booklet touchingly entitled *A Simple Way to Pray, Written for a Good Friend*.¹ Today this work is justly celebrated as a minor classic that both epitomizes Luther's spirituality and powerfully suggests what a deep and lasting impact he would make on the lives of his many followers. The after story, however, is less well known. In late summer that same year a letter from Luther made its way to Prince-Elector John Frederick's vice chancellor, the honorable Franz Burkhard, who was handling a criminal matter. In the letter Luther asked Burkhard to show clemency toward a convicted murderer: exile rather than execution. Ironically, this work too was written on behalf of Peter Beskendorf, who in late March, only weeks after the publication of *A Simple Way to Pray*, had stabbed to death his son-in-law, Dietrich von Freyenhagen. Luther's appeal had the desired effect: Beskendorf – whose crime had apparently been committed while inebriated – was exiled. As Luther had recommended, the man kept his life and suffered no violent punishment, but lost his home and possessions.²

The after story of Luther's *Simple Way to Pray* reminds us first of his conviction that the application of the law should always be tempered by the jurist's sensitivity to the particulars of the case. He never tired of repeating the old adage that "the strictest law is the highest injustice" (*summum ius summa iniuria*). The law should serve both the individual and the common good, and equity (ἐπιείκεια) demands that justice be ever tempered to

fit the facts. Dr. Luther clearly brought these convictions to the aid of Mr. Beskendorf.³ More importantly for present purposes, this story also reminds us that violence was not for Martin Luther merely a theoretical question. Indeed, Luther lived in an age characterized by a good deal of institutionalized violence, violence, that is, that was being carried out by civil and ecclesiastical rulers for a variety of purposes, including, e.g., the extension of kingdoms, the establishment of dynasties, the settling of border disputes, and, at least some of the time, the maintenance of social order. Indeed, wars of one kind or another proliferated in this period until they led at last to the Thirty Years War and related conflicts in the seventeenth century.⁴ For groups that rose up to challenge the existing social order the emerging early modern states of Luther's day were already beginning to amass standing armies, which could be used to put down rebellions of one kind or another.⁵

Against lawbreakers such as Beskendorf, moreover, the early modern civil authorities had ready to hand the tool of capital punishment, which could be administered in a number of horrific ways, and this tool was also used to punish religious dissenters. In Reformation times, for example, one might be burned as a Lutheran heretic in Belgium, as happened to two Augustinian friars who had become followers of Luther in 1522; for that matter, one could suffer the same fate as a Jewish *converso* (crypto-Jew) in an *auto-da-fé*, as were hundreds of Spanish Jews between 1481 and 1530. Or one could be drowned as an Anabaptist in Switzerland, as happened to Felix Manz in Zurich in 1527, or drawn and quartered as a Catholic priest in England, as happened to St. John Houghton in 1535, when he refused to recognize King Henry VIII as supreme head of the church. One of the most ironic markers of Christian Europe in the early modern period is the witness of martyrdom, which these religiously divided Christian peoples both gave and imposed, to and on one another.⁶

This is not to say that violent events such as the occasional war or the imposition of the death penalty were everyday occurrences in Luther's world. To the contrary, then as now, most men and women who were motivated to action by Christian faith and piety gave themselves over to quite different kinds of work, spending their lives teaching others about God's love, devoting themselves to daily prayer (as among the religious), feeding and housing the poor, or attempting to relieve the suffering of the sick or dying. Then as now, faith in the Good News of Jesus the Christ motivated many to lives of heroic service that left only faint traces in the historical records. These undeniable fruits of Christian faith typically receive much less attention today than do the acts of violence that marred early modern Christendom, for violence, after all, is much on *our* minds. Indeed, for increasing numbers of us today the fact of religiously motivated violence,

the apparent capacity of religion to make some people feel very good about behaving very badly, calls the entire enterprise of religion into question. What good is religion, some ask, if it produces the sorts of people who do such things?⁷

Today's worries about religion and violence, an unmistakable marker of post-9/11 existence, will surely not leave Martin Luther and his Reformation unexamined, even if his response to violence has been criticized many times before. In his own day, for example, many quite understandably found his reactions to the Peasant's uprising excessively harsh, legitimating the princes' excessively violent response.⁸ Going all the way back to Friedrich Engels this criticism was magnified in the Marxist literature on Luther and the Reformation, which somewhat implausibly made Thomas Müntzer the true hero of the age.⁹ More recently, all of us have fretted about the extent of Luther's responsibility for the sad fate of the Jews at the hands of the National Socialists.¹⁰ Did Luther's "Two Kingdoms" doctrine so compartmentalize Christian righteousness within the spiritual and hidden kingdom of God's right hand as to leave it no earthly good in the physical and tangible kingdom of the left hand?¹¹ Did Luther's political theology leave a legacy of ethical complacency? Thankfully, some of the shadows cast over Lutheran ethics by the last Great War have finally begun to fade. The urgency with which the latter question was once posed has been defused somewhat by a steadily developing recognition of Luther's joy, as one scholar recently put it, in the Law of God.¹² However fallibly he may have lived and acted in the events of his own time, Luther readily sang with the Psalmist, "Oh, how I love thy Law," and he did his best to hold Christian people accountable to it, as anyone familiar with his two great Catechisms, particularly their treatment of the Ten Commandments, can readily affirm. As a theorist, so to speak, of the Christian life, Luther seems to have left little room for ethical complacency.

The former question, however, abides. The status of Jews and Judaism in Luther's thought remains neuralgic, as a spate of recent works can well attest.¹³ We could add to it the difficulty of Luther's ill treatment of the "false brethren," so effectively showcased by Mark Edwards.¹⁴ Indeed, with abiding problems like this one in mind, Paul Hinlicky has urged that theological appropriation of Luther today must become a self-consciously *critical* enterprise, one that repeatedly endeavors to become aware of and excise the strategy of demonization he so often employed in controversy with his opponents, including not just the Jews, but Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims as well.¹⁵ Luther's rhetoric and invective were not infrequently violent and abusive, and for that reason must be handled today with great care.

Many of us remain convinced, nevertheless, that Luther is still a vital conversation partner, a man whose thought and history remain in many

ways yet to be discovered¹⁶ and whose potential contribution to theology and exegesis today therefore also remains at least somewhat unexplored. He was after all one of the greatest biblical expositors in the long Catholic tradition, and applied himself with energy and singular insight not only to the Scripture itself, but also to the events and controversies of his day. Scripture and life – no, Scripture and Luther’s life – informed and interpreted one another, and that dynamism made him a wondrously imaginative and exciting reader of the stories of the biblical saints, as we shall see below. Luther was contextual both as a theologian and as an exegete, which makes his exegetical writings, as Julius Köstlin observed long ago, an especially rich source of both Luther’s theology as well as his “practical wisdom of life.”¹⁷

Of course, we could bypass Luther’s exegesis and examine his theological evaluation of war and violence as found in occasional treatises that addressed the problem directly.¹⁸ For example, his important writing of 1523, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should Be Obeyed*, lays out what has traditionally been understood as a “two kingdoms” approach to balancing the authority of the state with that of the church so that they mutually support one another. The treatise provides state authority over against that of the church with compelling biblical grounding, notably Romans 13.¹⁹ The fallen world, Luther concluded, cannot be ruled by the Gospel, so the civil authorities must rule through pre/proscription and as well as through violent coercion, through the law, that is, and the sword.²⁰ Far from offering rulers carte blanche, however, Luther moved to moderate official acts of violence, arguing, for example, against the execution of heretics (although he hedged on that one later), and admonishing Christian princes to preserve the peace and avoid war. In this advice, perhaps he had in mind the example of his own Christian prince, Frederick the Wise, whose reputation as a peacemaker had earned him, from the German *Friedrich*, the nickname *Friedensreiche*: “peace lover.”

Instead of limiting myself to important texts like this one, however, I want to turn now instead to some of Luther’s exegetical writings, where he did the biblical spadework out of which occasional treatises like *Temporal Authority* grew. As will be shown below, when we examine Luther’s understanding of warfare and violence in the Christian life from the vantage point of biblical interpretation, where his pastoral instincts are on high alert for biblical support for the Christian struggling for faith and holiness, we find him at his best, also regarding the question of war and violence. Here he attempts a balancing act, in which he recognizes first of all that violence itself is necessary only because the assertion of evil has rendered the creation itself a site of conflict. Importantly, this reminds us that violence does not belong to the original

condition of humankind in Luther’s thought. Indeed, in an unfallen world – which Luther often imaginatively sketches out, particularly in his work on Genesis – war and violence would have had no place.²¹

I. Peaceable Origins

The backdrop, then, to Luther’s conflicted view of life in this fallen world is an irenic vision of the original creation, where an unfallen Adam and Eve once feasted their eyes on the “garden of delights” and found their hearts and minds elevated by every created thing to the love and contemplation of their Creator. Adam’s imposition of names upon the animals, and perhaps later upon his wife as well, was therefore in no way arbitrary, as if what he called each of them lacked any connection to their being, their purpose, their inherent beauty or goodness. Instead, Adam called things what they really were, for he, and later Eve as well, was so utterly suffused with the knowledge of God as to see through created things to their created end, their *telos*, and to their uncreated Source as well, as their final cause.²² Eden, as the elder Martin Luther imagined it, was unambiguously good in every way, and this inherent goodness left no room for violence of any kind. No force, no coercion, no dominance or submission could obtain within the human family, especially not between our “first parents.”²³ Eve, he averred, was her husband’s equal, a conviction he expressed in predictably patriarchal terms when he described her as a woman “who does things like a man.”²⁴ These two, moreover, were created for a life, and a spiritual body, that lay beyond what was given in the garden. Indeed, death was somehow natural to them, but only as the last step before their “translation” into the “spiritual body.”²⁵ This eschatological vision of the original and definitively peaceable kingdom of Eden must be kept ever in view, because it renders violence and coercion – about which Luther can be sometimes almost shockingly blunt – alien to the realities and purposes of the original creation, and just to that extent entirely unnatural.

In this fallen world, however, Luther unhesitatingly affirms that if violence must be done – and again he has no doubt that it must – then it is best done by people of faith. There can be no avoidance of this sad necessity. Here as in so many other areas of his thought Luther leaves the Christian no pious option to check out and leave the difficult responsibilities incumbent on life in the world to the “seculars.” To the contrary, the world is God’s own creation, and the struggle for faith and faithfulness as Luther describes it takes place in the concrete spheres of Christian existence that God has established, including not only the church with its pastors and preachers,

the Christian home with its mothers and fathers and children, but also the state, where God grants to Christian rulers distinctive gifts for keeping the peace, including the application of violence through war and capital punishment.²⁶ One can find therefore an authentic Christian faithfulness not only in the preacher or the parent, but also in the Christian ruler, the Christian soldier, or even the Christian executioner.²⁷

To be sure, on Luther's account, the civil rule, including the maintenance of order by coercive means, is less glorious than that offered in either the domestic or the ecclesial spheres, but it is not for that reason un-Christian. Good work in the kingdom of the left hand can therefore be good, including the good work of upholding the social order and effecting a measure of social justice by means of violence, even if such acts are not proper, so to speak, in terms of God's original intentions for an unfallen humanity.²⁸ As with the preacher or the parent so too the ruler or soldier should turn to the Scripture itself for instruction and inspiration for faithfulness within his calling. When we recall that in his "Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" of 1520 Luther had appealed to the civil rulers by virtue of their status as their society's first Christians (i.e., as both secular rulers and Christians baptized into the common priesthood) to take responsibility for the reform of the church, then it is perhaps somewhat less surprising to find him looking to the Scriptures for instruction for the good Christian prince or magistrate. In this way, the Bible is an imminently practical book, one that answers just the questions a good Christian prince or magistrate should ask: for what reasons should I wage war, and how should I do it? On whom, and for what crimes, must I impose the death penalty?²⁹

II. War and the Biblical Saints

To shed further light on the problem of war and violence in Luther's thought I turn now to a few of his readings of the Old Testament. It is true, as readers have often noted, that Luther took comfort in the failings of the biblical saints. God's gracious dealing with the fallible figures portrayed in the biblical narratives suggests hope for every struggling Christian. At the same time, however, it is equally true that his portrayal of the biblical saints was often saintly in a much more conventional way, which means that one regularly finds in his readings of the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Old Testament paradigmatic examples of men and women who epitomized the struggle for faith and faithfulness, including – mostly for the men – the Christian exercise of worldly authority, also by means of violence and coercion. Viewed through Luther's interpretive lens the heroes and heroines

of the Old Testament became, in effect, like Luther's own namesake, St. Martin of Tours, warrior saints, in both a literal and a figurative sense.

In the four brief exegetical vignettes set forth below, I examine some important aspects of Luther's approach to the question of war and violence. The first two are early exegeses of texts from the Pentateuch, which Luther had translated for the *Wittenberger Sonderausgabe des Pentateuchs*, published in August 1523, less than a year after the better known edition of the New Testament, the so-called "September Testament."³⁰ Turning first to his 1523-4 sermons on Genesis, we look in on his reading of the story of murderous Cain's exile, and the city he built. Next I examine the broad advice about war he offers in an interpretation of Deuteronomy 20 found in lectures from 1525. Afterwards we zoom out for a wider perspective offered in some of his lectures on Zechariah of 1527, which enable us to sketch out Luther's vision of violent conflict in the cosmos as a whole. Finally we leap ahead a decade or so to eavesdrop on the lectures of Genesis for a moment to see what Luther thought could be learned from one biblical example of warrior saint, father Abraham.

A. Luther on Cain: The origins of Arms and Defenses

In the sermons on Genesis of 1523-4 (published in Latin and German editions in 1527),³¹ Luther asks and answers the question of the origins of war. Examining the story of Cain's expulsion from Adam's household following his murder of Abel, Luther notes that Cain afterwards "built a city." Why, he wonders, does the Scripture first mention a city in association with this man? Why build a city? Luther's answer: fear.³² Cain had been expelled from the peaceable household of Adam (*die versammlung der gleubigen*),³³ an assembly of love and friendship that in Luther's understanding was *ecclesia* and *oeconomia* at the same time. Departing this community, the exiled Cain became a "citizen of the earth." Unlike the non-violent people he left behind, the murderous Cain figured he needed "arms and defenses" – that is, weapons and city walls – to protect his people. Arguing, as he is wont at times to do, from silence, Luther magnifies Cain's need by contrast to the situation in Adam's household, which he figures built neither weapons nor walls. Entering imaginatively into saintly Adam's psyche he explains that these good Christians [sic] did not even think about that, and their confident faith looked ahead to the promised Messiah, whom they expected to arrive soon.³⁴ They trusted in God and therefore had no need of arms or defenses.³⁵ Cain, on the other hand, had been exiled into a sad and

alien land, driven out from the “countenance of God” (*Gottes angesicht*), i.e., away from the household of faith in which, through the Word, God was present (*da ist Gott gegenwertig*).³⁶

So it is that the younger Luther locates the origins of the coercive rule of one human being over another, as well as the fear that motivates the building of a fortified city and the forging of swords, outside the first household of faith, in what immediately becomes the false church of the apostate Cain. Here the story of Cain’s exile functions, so to speak, as a second fall after the Fall. In this way, Luther rhetorically maximizes the distance between the fearful citizens of Cain’s city with the true Christians who remained in Adam’s fearless and therefore unfortified household, a sort of town versus country tension, if you will.³⁷ This early interpretation of Cain’s story suggests that in the young Luther’s understanding a properly Christian society would be, not to put too fine a point on it, *pacifistic*, that is, lacking arms or defenses. If the civil estate is understood as by its very nature as concerned with the coercive power that protects a people and punishes the wicked among them, then in the long ago history of the most ancient fallen human societies Luther positions *politia* on Cain’s side, in agonistic relationship to the original peaceable order, which remained intact despite the fall in the faith-filled household of Adam and Eve.

This retelling of the story contrasts markedly with what is found in Luther’s better known lectures on Genesis delivered about 10 years later, where he shifted the origins of coercive state power back a generation into fallen Adam’s rule over his wife,³⁸ a movement that seems to reflect his growing concern more effectively to validate sixteenth-century political authority, or at the very least not to make it seem as if true Christians should be without arms or defenses. In 1525, after all, the peasants had revolted against the established authorities in the name of “godly law,” and Luther in response had urged their violent suppression.³⁹ Ten years after the earlier Genesis sermons had been preached, moreover, Luther’s reform movement had come increasingly to rely not only on the political cover provided by his stalwart prince elector, John Frederick (1503-54; ruled, 1532-47), but also on the League of Smalcald, a defensive alliance of the Protestant princes formed in response to the Imperial Congress held at Speyer in 1529, which had called not only for a cessation of church reform but for the enforcement of the Edict of Worms as well. The fate of Luther’s movement rested, in short, upon the military might and political savvy of the princes who protested this edict

of Speyer. This is not the place to explore these questions further, but the difference between the younger and the older Luther on the emergence of coercive civil government as a means of preserving godly order – whether later with Cain’s exile, or earlier with Eve’s subjection to her husband – seems to reflect both the unsettling experience of the violent disorder occasioned by the Peasant’s uprising of 1525,⁴⁰ and the pressing need to validate duly established Protestant political authority after 1529.

B. *Luther on Deuteronomy 20: Making War the Right Way*

In May of 1526 Luther’s treatise “How Christians Should Regard Moses” was published by Hans Weisz in Wittenberg. There he argued that the Ten Commandments should be understood as the expression of a universally recognizable natural law, the Jewish version, as he put it, of what one could also find in ancient Roman law, as well as the German *Sachsenspiegel* (code of law).⁴¹ His commentary on Deuteronomy, published in 1525, evidences a similar spirit, where Luther attempts to identify which elements of the law belong solely to Israel’s history and which embody enduring principles. Among the latter, he includes the Mosaic prescriptions for the application of the death penalty and the proper conduct of war.

Luther’s task was not easy. Deuteronomy 20 presents the reader with difficult questions about God’s election of Israel and violence. The Lord God is giving Israel a promised land, but their taking possession of it depends on first violently dispossessing it from its current inhabitants, including in some cases killing all the males among them, and in other cases destroying those peoples entirely. Deuteronomy 19 introduces the topic of killing, where the law parses the differences between intentional and unintentional homicidal acts. Luther reads chapter 20 as a continuation of that topic. At this point, he surmises, Deuteronomy has completed its treatment of duties related to the First Table of the law, the duty to worship and obey God, and moves on to those related to the Second Table, the duties one owes to other people in one’s community. The overarching rule of the latter, he claims, is *the law of love*, which functions to bind people together in community with all the benefits appertaining thereunto, especially peace and security, because all the members of the community cast their lot together for mutual support and defense.

This communal law of love seems a curious contrast to the fear that Luther had found just a year earlier at the root of the commu-

nity gathered in the city of the exiled Cain. In this case, the city and its defenses are an expression of the law of love, and of one's service of the community's common good. The historical situation dictates this change, it seems, for the community of Israel finds itself threatened from within and without. The love that preserves the bond of community must be "severe and merciless," he insists, because it recognizes the necessity of strict law for the maintenance of order and the preservation of life. Though the principle of equity may at times call for moderation, in other cases the good of the community requires that the law should be applied severely and without mercy. For that reason, Luther here unequivocally endorses the death penalty for intentional murder – "because he who kills intentionally has sinned out of malice and has disturbed the public peace" – arguing that murderers cannot take sanctuary even in a holy place but ought rather to be "seized from the altar of the Lord and killed."⁴² Clearly Luther is reading this text not just as a story about the particular laws and practices of the people of ancient Israel, but as a reflection as well of the general principles by which societies of all times should be ordered and ruled.

This early reading of Deuteronomy is also punctuated by occasional excursions on the text's allegorical meaning. In later times, Luther would insist that the spiritual meaning of the text was to be sought in the letter,⁴³ but in this case he moves more conventionally from a literal exegesis to a figural one. Literally, so Luther, this text relates Israel's "law of war." This law is special and peculiar in so far as it depends first and foremost on Israel's abiding recognition that victory depends not upon strength of arms but upon faith in the Word of God. Armor and weapons are only the outer masks (*larvae dei*) under which the Lord, who fights for them, hides himself. Armor and weapons, therefore, were only necessary for Israel insofar as they prevented the people from tempting God by, for example, attempting to fight without any weapons at all. History, then, including all the vicissitudes of war, is a mask beneath which God works in a hidden way to achieve his own purposes.

Luther is also deeply impressed in this text by what we might call Moses' preferential option for peace. Even when foreign nations do not accept Israel's proffer of peace, moreover, the law demands moderation: a "civil and fine moderation should be observed in war," Luther writes. "He wants this people to be civil and not barbarous, and to wage war, not to devastate a land which has not sinned

but to sweep away the godless."⁴⁴ Israel should wage war, moreover, with self-control so that their soldiers will not "rage against women and girls in debauchery, lust, and other violence after conquering the enemy, as happens nowadays in our barbarity."⁴⁵ This line suggests that Luther recognizes a certain distance between the world of ancient Israel and his own. He does not, however, draw from that fact the implication that these rules of war were time bound, laid down only with Israel's invasion of the Promised Land in view. To the contrary, for Luther they express general principles applicable to war and the maintenance of the public peace. Deuteronomy 20 as Luther reads it prescribes the faith, humility, and moderation proper to the waging of war.

Luther then turns to allegory, where his reading of this text spiritualizes the honorable warfare described above so that it morphs into a vision of the militant Christian, who, like Luther himself, is engaged in the struggle for faith against the church's enemies. This reading ratchets down some of the tension inherent in any Christian reading of the text, insofar as it explains away some of the blood and gore. The wars in which Luther is interested here are not the ones fought between nations, but those that pit the true faith against heresy. The text provides him with a typology. Israel, he notes, had faced three kinds of enemies: first, the foreign nations that accepted Israel's offer of peace, then those that rejected it, and, finally, the enemies within, whom Luther likens to the Canaanites and Amorites, i.e., those who lived within the boundaries of Israel's own Promised Land. The first type symbolizes heretics or outsiders to the faith who hear the Word of God and right away give up their belief in works righteousness and make peace with the Gospel; their reception of the offer of peace epitomizes the surrender with which every Christian life begins. The second type represents those who employ the weapons of Scripture to oppose the Gospel. Of these only "the males are to be killed," which according to Luther means only that the leaders among them must be defeated and slain, that is, condemned and cast out of the church. Finally, there are those who are hardened and obstinate enough in their heresy that they must be anathematized and excluded from the community, cursed, in other words, and exiled.

The violent history of Israel's occupation of the Promised Land is thus made a figure of the violence which theologians must do as their contribution to the Christianization of their own lands and societies. Again, this is not physical violence. Indeed, Luther

insists here that the church conquers through the Word that smites consciences, not through the physical sword that ruins bodies. He rejects, in other words, the violent coercion of those who will not convert to the evangelical cause, or at least capital punishment for heresy, a fearsome prospect to which he himself was no stranger, and which he had argued against in his “Appeal to the Christian Nobility” in 1520.⁴⁶ The Christian, then, is a warrior in so far as he fights with the weapons of the Word of God to see the Gospel rightly preached and widely accepted. Thus Luther’s allegorical reading of this “hard text” from the Old Testament supports a significant curb on the state’s use of violent coercion in the case of religious conflict when he prescribes exile for heresy rather than the death penalty. Although Luther was not a forerunner of the early modern states’ religious toleration, then at least in this case he does argue for a lesser penalty for religious non-conformity. In later years Luther would endorse the death penalty against the Anabaptists on grounds that they were guilty of both blasphemy and sedition.⁴⁷ Once again, the trajectory of his development is toward identification and support for the secular authorities in their vocation of keeping order, especially in seeing to it that the Word of God is rightly taught and practiced.

C. *Cosmic Conflict: The Lectures on Zechariah*

In Luther’s understanding, as Heiko Oberman reminded us not so long ago, conflict is much more than a this-worldly matter.⁴⁸ Indeed, in a series of lectures on Zechariah published in 1527, we discover that this conflict extends, so to speak, from the top all the way down. Zech1:7ff recounts the prophet’s vision of angels riding horses.⁴⁹ Luther interprets the angelic discussion related there as an example of “how God rules the world through the angels.”⁵⁰ God has instituted, he claims, a four-fold government (*vierley regiment*) – which is actually, as we shall see, five-fold – at the highest level of which is the *regiment* of God, who works all in all without anyone’s help, as, for example, when he makes or multiplies his creatures “durch seine macht alleine.”⁵¹

Beneath the level of God’s own immediate government, however, he also rules over humankind through a series of four further governments (*Regimenten*). The first of these is the angelic government, in which the holy angels “do their part” (*das yhr dazu*) and watch over humankind “from the outside” (*von aussen*).⁵² They do so through “understanding and reason” (*verstand und vernunfft*), by

which Luther means that the angels’ knowledge of God, unlike that of fallen human beings, is unobscured by the fall.⁵³ The unfallen angels, who already perceive God face to face, are established as external caregivers for fallen humankind, mediators of his grace and providential care. Most fundamentally, they preserve people from the consequences of the fall, not only by preventing physical harm but also by inspiring “useful and helpful thoughts” and in that way preserving them spiritually.⁵⁴

The angels’ ministry also includes a mediating role in the present administration of human affairs.⁵⁵ Zechariah mentions the prophet’s encounter with a rider on a red horse, apparently an angel, who speaks of those who have been sent to “patrol the earth.” Riders on other horses – red, sorrel, and white – report to the first angel that “the earth remains at peace.” In an earlier version of this commentary Luther explains that the riders are the angels, “through whom God manages this visible world,”⁵⁶ while the horses are the nations over whom the angels rule. The peace the riders report, then, pertains to the very horses they sit astride.

Beneath the angelic rule Luther positions a third kind of government (*das dritte regiment*), namely, God’s rule over human beings through apostles and preachers, who exercise their divinely appointed office through the external (*eusserleich*) proclamation of the Word of God. Here God makes human beings his co-workers. Alongside their work of preaching and teaching the external Word, God once again does his own work, unseen and interior (*ynnwendig*),⁵⁷ instructing both the preachers and their hearers through the Holy Spirit. By God’s ordination, however, saving faith in the Gospel depends on the external human proclamation of the Word carried out by this “third government.”

The home and secular authority (*weltliche regiment*) constitute the fourth and fifth governments, with the secular authority ranked as the lowest (*das unerste*, which seems to support my surmise that Luther’s support for secular government grows as does the dependence of the Reformation upon it).⁵⁸ Parents, he notes, imitate God, for God also plays the role of parent, as in the case of Adam and Eve or even with orphan children. In this world God, however, has assigned his own parental role to human parents, who nurture and care for their young, and also exercise authority over them. Alongside this “home government” (*haus regiment*) one also finds the worldly government, which, Luther says, rules by “the sword and the fist,” violence and coercion.

He then makes clear the mutual interdependence of the orders. With the exception of the direct rule of God, each of these governments serves to reinforce all the others: “the sword serves the Gospel,” for example, because it demands respect and obedience, which creates a peaceful public space within which the Word of God can be preached and believed. The angelic regiment, in turn, is ordered to the working of both the Word and the sword, for the angels move people toward obedience to both. Likewise, as Luther puts it, “the Word and the sword are ordered to the angelic rule, for they make room and prepare people through peace, so that the angels may all the better approach them and promote their rule [*regiment*].”⁵⁹ The four governments thus lead believers into proper conformity with divine order and reason; in this way God’s appointed ends are achieved not just in the midst of conflict, but through and by means of it.

It is crucial to note that with the exception of God’s own immediate rule over all things, conflict characterizes Luther’s orders of government at every level. Against the four governments of angels, preachers, parents, and magistrates the devil ever rages, doing everything possible to destroy all God’s good creation.⁶⁰ The fourfold government thus constitutes a rule in the midst of opposition: the fallen angels oppose the good, heretics and false teachers oppose the apostles and prophets, disobedient children oppose their parents, and rebellious or lawless people oppose the worldly regiment. When such evils seem to gain the upper hand, the failure of divinely instituted government reflects nothing so much as a temporary but providential withdrawal of God’s own rule as a means of punishment. As God effects the good through external means, so the withdrawal of God’s internal power and effect allows evil to advance, through both the fallen angels and sinful human beings. In short, the divine order and rule are contested. Not this earth only, but the cosmos itself is an arena of conflict, of battle, of violence and war.

D. *The Genesis Lectures: Abraham’s Just and Moderate War*

We turn now to Abraham as an example of one who embodies much of what has been sketched out above. As Juhani Forsberg has observed, Luther praised Abraham highly, as a *pater fidei sanctissimus*, and made him a great hero and example of the Christian faith. More than that, Abraham was simultaneously *paterfamilias*, priest, and prince over his extended family. To that extent, he exercised a position of authority in all three spheres of this-worldly rule

identified in the Zechariah lectures: church, home, and state. As if those three offices were not enough, in both his *Supputatio annorum mundi* and in the *Enarrationes* on Genesis Luther also identified Abraham as an eschatological figure, the “*gubernator*” who introduced the world’s third age (*tertii millennarii gubernator*) following the destruction of the old world in the flood.

The *gubernatores* of the changing ages of world history were in Luther’s understanding heroes, that is, saints. Before Abraham they included Adam, who lived by faith in the promise of God after his tragic fall into sin, and was the *gubernator* of the first millennium,⁶¹ as well as holy Noah, a prophet of God through whose eyes the righteous God saw and judged the wickedness of the world.⁶² As *gubernator* of the world’s third age, holy Abraham symbolized the announcement of a new promise and with it the arrival of a new day in which it became clear that the Messiah would come from Abraham’s own flesh. He signals the Christian hope for a new and better world, and the fulfillment of that hope, Luther surmised, is coming very soon. Abraham, then, is not only for Luther a paradigm of the call to faith through the Word of God, but also a reminder that things do not always stay the way they have been. This point also has a particular poignancy for Luther, because he saw himself, too, as an eschatological figure, or at least as caught up in a great eschatological struggle. Biography and autobiography are ever a jumble in Luther’s exegesis.

Genesis 14 recounts the story of St. Abraham’s victory over Chedorloamer, when he restored Lot and his household from captivity. Luther finds much to praise in Abraham’s conduct of this war. It was only some 30 years or so after the great flood, he calculates, and already men were rushing headlong into sin, with a group of some nine tyrannous kings gathered here to wage war against one another for domination in the land. God “wants there to be government [*imperia*],” Luther assures us, for both the defense of the godly and the damnation of the wicked, “but Satan corrupts their hearts, and the magistrates degenerate into tyrants.”⁶³ Following the great battle between these tyrants, Lot and his clan were carried off into captivity, at which point they become for Luther a type of the Christian who faces adversity: life, that is, under the cross. It seems to Lot and his family that all is surely lost, but God has in mind a miraculous rescue, one that will confirm their trust in God. “This game, with its perpetual reversals, he [God] ever plays with his saints.”⁶⁴ Attending to the wondrous reversal about to come, Luther notes

that Abraham is called here for the first time a “Hebrew,” which he thinks identifies Abraham as one who had kept to the pure religion and the true church of the patriarchs. This great man had no concern for the fate of the five wicked kings and their peoples, but he determined to rescue his kinsman Lot and his family on account of their shared faith in the true God.

The military attack led by holy Abraham, Luther figures, was both brave and cunning, and this from a man who not long before had identified his wife as his sister out of fear of Egypt’s Pharaoh. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit in this case gave Abraham a courage and confidence greater than that of any Hannibal or Scipio. Adopting a brilliant strategy, he fell upon his enemy by night, and from many different directions, routing them from the field. He drew the sword, Luther notes, to protect his kinsman, that is, as a textbook example of the proper application of the coercive power of government to protect its citizens. The angel of the Lord, too, fought on Abraham’s side in this battle, joining forces, so to speak, with the civil government embodied in Abraham, in order to strike fear into the hearts of his enemies.⁶⁵ Afterwards, moreover, Abraham was magnanimous in victory, refusing to make it a pretext to claim the whole of the land of Canaan as his own. Inwardly, Luther surmises, Abraham interpreted the promise of that land as a blessing to be fulfilled in Christ, for as the Savior says in John 8:56, “Abraham saw my day and was glad.” Still, Luther wonders, how did Abraham know that God would be with him and give him the victory? His answer? Abraham acted at the command of the Holy Spirit. His action provides no example, Luther hastens to add, to be imitated in the present, as those like Thomas Müntzer and other “seditious rubes” would like to think.⁶⁶

From this remark we can better appreciate the fine line Luther is attempting to walk here. On the one hand, he wants to praise Abraham for the military action he took in defense of his kinsman, and to give God credit for the victory, just as he had insisted in his interpretation of Deuteronomy 20. Abraham used arms and violence, but he did not trust in them for the victory. On the other hand, however, Luther is well aware that conceding even to such a great man as Abraham the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to justify an obviously violent episode is a theological hot potato, for claims to the inspiration of the Spirit could be used to justify a wide variety of rash or rebellious deeds, like those he associates with Müntzer.

The deeds of an Abraham should therefore be wondered at, Luther insists, but not imitated.⁶⁷ In the end, then, Abraham is established in Luther’s reading of this text as a man of “distinguished faith and a truly heroic spirit.”⁶⁸ He was both a saint and, at just the right time and to just the right degree, a warrior. Moreover, the violent acts that were required in order to free his captive kinsman did not separate him from the Spirit of God. Indeed, the Spirit led him, and the angel of the Lord fought on his side.

Conclusions

We began with a series of questions regarding violence in Luther’s theology, perhaps most importantly whether Luther somehow promoted religious violence. As has been shown, his vision for the original creation leaves no room for violence and coercion, which become realities in this life only after the fall. Thereafter, however, violence is unmasked as a cosmic reality, one that antedates the peaceable kingdom of Eden, with the sounds of conflict echoing up and down the great chain of being so to speak, as reflected in his lectures on Zechariah. For this reason, violence is unavoidable. Though his early reading of the story of Cain seems to suggest a peaceable and even pacifistic Christian kingdom in this world after the fall, his later exegesis steps back from that conclusion and he more consistently grants the secular powers their place as good gifts from God. Still, Luther typically works very hard to restrain the application of violence even in this fallen world, developing a model of princely rule that is at once firm and threatening toward lawbreakers but gentle and even magnanimous toward those who accept correction, as seen in his lectures on Deuteronomy, and as witnessed to in his plea for clemency for Peter Beskendorf. Though he would later change his mind, in these early exegetical vignettes he also opposes the application of the death penalty, even for persistent theological error.

Though the reading of Abraham examined above was given many years later, still we find in it a textbook case of the application of Luther’s principles regarding war and violence. As a warrior saint, Abraham epitomizes simultaneously the faithfulness of the pastor, the practical wisdom of the *Hausvater*, and the steadfastness of the prince. When Abraham fought, God fought on his side. This image of the militant saint comports quite well with Luther’s broader conception of the Christian life, which is marked indelibly by a certain kind of spiritual violence. On Luther’s account it is the task of every Christian so to let Christ be born in her as to rise anew each day and begin the battle all over again. The terrible malady of sin,

however – the conflict and disorder that characterize human life this side of Eden – requires a severe mercy. The agent of grace must be merciless to sin in order to effect the mercy of renovation in the believer. The converse of the Christian’s daily rising in Christ, then, is the daily putting to death of the old Adam, living a life, in other words, in which sin is ruled over and conquered, through faith and the Holy Spirit. For this metaphorical battle Scripture and especially the stories of the biblical saints provide, on Luther’s account, a sure and certain guide.

Notes

- 1 Luther citations are from the critical edition of his works: *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-); *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Deutsche Bibel*, 12 vols (Weimar: Böhlau, 1906-61); *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Briefwechsel*, 18 vols (Weimar: Böhlau, 1930-85); *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden*, 6 vols (Weimar: Böhlau, 1912-21). These are abbreviated as WA, WA DB, WA Br, and WA TR. English translations are from *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 55 vols. plus 20 vols in the New Edition (Philadelphia/St. Louis, 1955-). Abbreviated as LW.
- 2 The best English-language biographies of Martin Luther include: H. G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1978); Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart; New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989). The authoritative biography is Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther* (3 vols; trans. James L. Schaff; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1985-93). For two more recent studies that challenge aspects of the long-settled conventional narrative of the young Luther’s development, see Volker Leppin, *Martin Luther* (2nd ed; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010), and Franz Posset, *The Real Luther: A Friar at Erfurt and Wittenberg* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011).
- 3 For Luther and ἐπιείκεια, see Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography*, 345-50. I acknowledge here as well a debt to my graduate student Jason Gehrke’s as-yet unpublished work on ἐπιείκεια in Luther’s thought.
- 4 For a withering attack on the secularist narrative that labels these the “wars of religion,” see William T. Cavanaugh’s provocative work, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford, 2009). Cavanaugh methodically deconstructs the notion that the Thirty Years War and related conflicts had primarily to do with religion, pointing instead to the rise of the modern nation state as the source of the violence.
- 5 For warfare and the development of arms in this period, see Michael E. Mallett, “The Art of War,” in *Handbook of European History 1400-1600: Late Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Reformation*, Vol. 1: *Structures and Assertions* (ed. Thomas A. Brady, Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 535-62.
- 6 On this topic, see Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- 7 This criticism is frequently voiced by representatives of the “new atheism.” For a learned and insistent rejoinder, see David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).
- 8 For a selection of Luther’s writings on some of these problems, see the new *Martin Luther on the Freedom of a Christian, with Related Texts* (trans. Tryntje Helfferich; Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2013), which offers, inter alia, a translation of Thomas Müntzer’s “Highly Provoked Defense” alongside Luther’s “Against the Robbing, Murdering Hordes of Peasants.”
- 9 For an interesting study of the place of Luther in the thought of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, see Roland Boer, “Reformation and Revolution: Concerning the Interpretation of Luther in Marx and Engels,” *Sino-Christian Studies* 11 (2011) 45-72. The classic study of the problem is Abraham Friesen, *Reformation and Utopia: The Marxist Interpretation of the Reformation and its Antecedents* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1974). A perceptive analysis of Luther’s theology in relation to Marxist thought may be found in Paul R. Hinlicky, *Luther and the Beloved Community: A Path for Christian Theology after Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), ch. 9: “Passion and Action in Christ: Political Theology between the Times,” 301-57.
- 10 Assessments of Luther’s thought in this difficult area abound, but the considered judgment of Heiko A. Oberman, included in a last collection of his essays and published posthumously, stands out: “From Luther to Hitler,” chapter 5 in *The Two Reformations: The Journey from the Last Days to the End of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
- 11 On Luther’s “two kingdoms doctrine” and its long and problematic reception in Lutheran theology, see William J. Wright, *Martin Luther’s Understanding of God’s Two Kingdoms: A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), esp. ch. 1.
- 12 See Andreas Wöhle, *Luthers Freude an Gottes Gesetz* (Frankfurt, Germany: Haag & Herchen, 1998).
- 13 See, e.g., Thomas Kaufmann, “Luther and the Jews,” in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (ed. Dean Philip Bell and Stephen G. Burnett; Leiden: Brill, 2006) 69-104; Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther’s Anti-Semitism: Against His Better Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). For a selection of original texts in translation, with helpful introductions, see Brooks Schramm and Kirsi I. Stjerna, *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People: A Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).
- 14 See Mark U. Edwards, Jr, *Luther and the False Brethren* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).
- 15 See Paul Hinlicky, “The Problem of Demonization in Luther’s Apocalyptic Theology,” in *Luther and the Beloved Community*, 379-85. For Luther’s approach to Islam, see Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Gregory J. Miller, “Luther on the Turks and Islam,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000): 79-97.
- 16 For support of my claim for a Luther yet to be discovered, a good starting point is Risto Saarinen, “Luther the Urban Legend,” in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times* (ed. Christine Helmers; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) 13-31. For a more programmatic attempt to destabilize the traditional Luther narrative, see *Transformations in Luther’s Theology: Historical and Contemporary Reflections* (ed. Christine Helmers and Bo Kristian Holm; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011).
- 17 See Julius Köstlin and Gustav Kawerau, *Martin Luther: sein Leben und seine Schriften*

- (vol. 2; Berlin, 1903) 425.
- 18 For a collection of Luther's political writings, see J. M. Porter, ed., *Luther: Selected Political Writings* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1974).
- 19 Interestingly, Luther advised Christians to be obedient citizens, even in the event of a Muslim conquest, which seemed a distinct possibility in his day. See Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam*.
- 20 Note well, however, Svend Anderson's argument that while Luther would not allow that the state could be ruled by the Gospel, he nevertheless recognized it as an arena for the concrete application of the law of Christian love, in which the Christian acts in service to the neighbor in need, extending the "happy exchange" given in justification so as to make Christ present in self-giving love in this world. See Svend Anderson, "Lutheran Political Theology in the Twenty-First Century," in *Transformations in Luther's Theology*, 245-63.
- 21 Recent works on Luther's Genesis lectures include: Juhani Forsberg, *Das Abraham-bild in der Theologie Luthers: Pater Fidei Sanctissimus* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1984); John A. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Sixteenth Century Studies & Essays 80; Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008); Mickey Leland Mattox, "Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs:" *Martin Luther's Interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the Enarrationes in Genesis 1535-1545* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).
- 22 For some further detail on this point, see Mickey L. Mattox, "Hearer of the Triune God: Martin Luther's Reading of Noah," in *Luther Digest: Volume 20 Supplement* (St. Louis, MO: Luther Academy, 2012) 49-70; esp 52-56.
- 23 See Mattox, *Defender*, chaps 1-2.
- 24 WA 42:103,12-13: "Heum autem dicit vocandam *Ischa*, perinde ac si dicas a Vir Vira, quod sit uxor, *heroica Mulier, quae virilia gerit.*" Italics mine.
- 25 WA 42:42,26-8: "Cessassent autem ista corporalia praefinito tempore post impletum numerum Sanctorum, et Adam cum posteritate sua esset translatus ad aeternam et spiritualem vitam." ("At a predetermined time, after the number of saints had been filled up, these bodily matters would have come to an end, and Adam with his posterity would have been carried up to an eternal and spiritual life.")
- 26 For Luther's "three estates doctrine," see Wilhelm Maurer, *Luthers Lehre von den drei Hierarchien und ihre mittelalterliche Hintergrund* (Munich: Verlag der Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1970). Some ethical implications are examined in Risto Saarinen, "Ethics in Luther's Theology," in *Moral Philosophy on the Threshold of Modernity* (Dordrecht, Germany: Springer, 2005) 195-215.
- 27 See, e.g., Luther's 1526 writing *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved*. LW 46:87-137; WA 19:623-62.
- 28 See, e.g., Luther's remarks in the confession of faith appended at the end of his "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper" (1528), LW 37:364: "But the holy orders and true religious institutions established by God are these three: the office of priest, the estate of marriage, the civil government Moreover, princes and lords, judges, civil officers, state officials, notaries, male and female servants and all who serve such persons, and further, all their obedient subjects – all are engaged in pure holiness and leading a holy life before God. For these three religious institutions or orders are found in God's Word and commandment; and whatever is contained in God's Word must be holy, for God's Word is holy and sanctifies everything connected with it and involved in it."
- 29 Here we discover the rationale behind Luther's peculiar commentary on the *Song of Songs*, which he interpreted neither as a tribute to marital love, nor as an allegory of the relationship between Christ and the soul or the church, but as a manual for the Christian prince. Luther seems to have thought that the reading of the *Song of Songs* as an allegory of the soul supported the dominance of the church over the state, and the superiority of monastic life to life in the world. On this topic, see Jarrett A. Carty, "Martin Luther's Political Interpretation of the *Song of Songs*," *The Review of Politics* 73/3 (2011) 449-67, with further bibliography.
- 30 See WA DB 8.
- 31 *Reihenpredigten über das erste Buch Mose // In Genesis Mosi librum sanctissimum D. Martini Lutheri Declamationes*, WA 24:1-710.
- 32 WA 24:143a,1-3, where the Latin version makes the division between the two households clear: "Hic sunt duo populi, facti separati a se: qui cum Adam sunt, non aedificant civitatem, sed qui cum Cain, qui timent: timuit Cain, ne ob homicidium occideretur, ideo constituit Rempubicam aedificata urbe."
- 33 WA 24:143b,11-12.
- 34 Maxfield argues persuasively that one of Luther's achievements in the later *Enarrationes in Genesis* was to recover a biblical and apostolic sense of the imminent *parousia*. See his *Luther's Lectures on Genesis*, chap 5.
- 35 WA 24:143b,28-34: "Da beschreibt Moses Kains geschlecht bis ynns siebend gelied, Sonderlich sagt er, das Kain eine stad gebawet habe, Die stad hat er gebawet als ein buerger auff erden, Denn wenn es also stuende, das wir alle Christen weren, doerfft man nicht des weltlichen schwerds und schutzs. Die bey Adam blieben sind, haben keine stad gebawet noch sich gedacht zu schuetzen und weren. Dieser aber hat freylich daruemb gebawet, das er etwas sicher moechte sein, weil er sich furchtet und zaget."
- 36 WA 24:143b,6-11: "Wie ist Kain von Gottes angesicht gangen, so yhm doch niemand entlauffen kan? Antwort: Es ist soviel gesagt: Er ist geflohen vom vater yns elende und ynn ein frembde land komen, da niemand gewonet hat, Das heist von Gottes angesicht geflohen, Denn wo Christen sind, die Gottes wort haben und predigen, da ist Gott gegenwertig, da sihet er hin, wie die schrifft viel mal sagt."
- 37 Further to Cain's relationship to the *ecclesial/oconomia* of Adam, one may consult Mickey L. Mattox, "Fortuita Misericordia: Martin Luther on the Salvation of Biblical Outsiders," *Pro Ecclesia* 17/4 (2006) 423-41.
- 38 See Mattox, *Defender*, 92-8.
- 39 For the treatise "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants," see Porter, *Selected Political Writings*, 85-8.
- 40 Maurer sees a connection, too: "Der Bauernkrieg brachte eine revolutionäre Erschütterung dieses Ordnungsgefüges. Bald nach seiner Beendigung – um den 1. November 1525 herum – hat Luther in zwei Predigten die regierende Gewalt am Elternamt illustriert." *Luthers Lehre von den drei Hierarchien*, 21.
- 41 LW 35:161-174. This 'treatise' was originally a sermon that Luther preached as an introduction to Exodus 19-20 during his 1524-1525 sermon series on Exodus. The sermon was delivered on Aug. 27, 1525.
- 42 LW 9:195.
- 43 For the Reformation insistence on the spirituality of the letter as an extension of developments that marked later medieval exegesis, see Christopher Ocker, *Biblical Poetics Before Humanism and Reformation* (New York: Cambridge, 2002). For Luther's explicit rejection of allegory and his insistence that the spiritual meaning is to be found

- in the story level of the text, see, e.g., “Luther’s Preface to Justus Menius, *Commentary on the First Book of Samuel*,” LW 60:7-10.
- 44 LW 9:204.
- 45 LW 9:204.
- 46 Writing in 1520, Luther rejected capital punishment for heretics. Considering the burning of John Hus in the “Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” he said: “The devil made the Romanists mad and foolish so that they did not know what they had said and done. God has commanded that a promise of safe-conduct shall be kept. We should keep such a commandment though the whole world collapses. How much more, then, when it is only a question of freeing a heretic! We should overcome heretics with books, not with fire, as the ancient fathers did. If it were wisdom to vanquish heretics with fire, then the public hangmen would be the most learned scholars on earth. We would no longer need to study books, for he who overcomes another by force would have the right to bum him at the stake.” LW 44:196; cf WA 6:455,19-25.
- 47 Luther associated the Anabaptists with both Müntzer and the Sacramentarians. For an analysis, see John S. Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers against Anabaptists: Luther, Melancthon, and Menius, and the Anabaptists of Central Germany* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1964) 126ff.
- 48 Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*.
- 49 “Der Prophet Sacharja ausgelegt,” WA 23:485-664; LW 20:153-347.
- 50 WA 23:511,34; LW 20:169. On Zech 1:7.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 WA 23:512,5.
- 53 WA 23:513,39.
- 54 WA 23:512,6-7.
- 55 The earlier Latin version of the Zechariah lectures that derives from the original lectures of 1525-6 confirms as much. “In Zachariam Prophetam,” WA 13:546-669; LW 20:1-152.
- 56 WA 13:558,3-4: “Equites haud dubie sunt angeli, per quos administrat deus hunc mundum visibilem.” LW 20:15. On Zech 1:8.
- 57 WA 23:512,8-9.
- 58 WA 23:514,19.
- 59 WA 23:514,27-31; translation from LW 20:172, slightly amended.
- 60 WA 23:514,32-4: “Widder solche Gotts regimente tobet nu der Satan, des ampt nichts anders ist denn alles zuberechen und zurstoeren, was Gott durch diese regimente schafft und thut.”
- 61 WA 53:38.
- 62 WA 53:39. To this topic one may consult my “Hearer of the Triune God,” cited above.
- 63 WA 42:526,19-21.
- 64 WA 42:527,4. For these “reversals,” in which God sometimes appears as the devil and the devil as God, see Mattox, *Defender*, 227-31.
- 65 WA 42:531,28-30.
- 66 WA 42:531,7-10.
- 67 On this “narrative barrier” between the acts of the biblical saints and the lives of contemporary Christians, which Luther admits becomes permeable in the challenges to faith the believer faces in this life, see Mattox, *Defender*, 250-1.
- 68 WA 42:532,3-4.

Mickey Mattox is Associate Professor of Historical Theology at Marquette University. A historical theologian with a Ph.D. from Duke University, his publications focus on interpreting Luther’s theology in its late medieval Catholic context. At Marquette he directs the Luther Studies in a Catholic Context program. His translation of An Exposition of Genesis by Johann Oecolampadius was published in 2013. “Warrior Saints: Warfare and Violence in Martin Luther’s Readings of Some Old Testament Texts” was presented at the 2013 Fall Academy.