

Luther on Princes and Peasants

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Although the inventor of the modern discipline of history, Leopold von Ranke, established the ideal for his disciples of telling the past “as it really happened,” the writing of history has always included a mixture of facts and interpretation, a mixture of what really happened with what the historians and their patrons wish had happened, a mixture of the past that is beyond our reach with the inventions and fabrications that serve our propaganda purposes. No depiction of a public figure’s position on a subject illustrates this more clearly than the charge that Martin Luther advocated oppression of the “lower classes” in the interests of exalting the power of absolutist princes. No report of events proves that any more clearly than the retelling of Luther’s involvement with the great German peasant rebellion of 1524-1526.

Luther and the Peasants

His earliest Lutheran biographers treated the events of the Revolt quite briefly, affirming Luther’s rejection of the disorder incited by peasant leaders, particularly by Thomas Müntzer.¹ His first biographer, his Roman Catholic opponent, Johann Cochlaeus offered extensive description of peasant rebellions and the sedition of common people in the towns in several areas and criticized Luther both for stirring up the revolt and for his harsh words against the peasantry.² Other Roman Catholic foes quickly joined Cochlaeus in blaming Luther for the Revolt, charging that his treatise, *The Freedom of the Christian*, and others of his writings, had aroused the peasants to fight for their freedom, and at the same time they

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¹ Johannes Mathesius, *Historien/ Von des Ehrwürdigen in Gott Seligen thewren Manns Gottes/ Doctoris Martini Luthers/ anfang/ lehr/ leben vnd sterben . . .* (Nuremberg: Johann von Berg’s heirs and Ulrich Neuber, 1566), XLVIa-XLVIIIb; Ludwig Rabus, *Historien der Martyrer/ Ander Theil . . .* (Strassburg: Johann Rihel, 1572), 166a..

² Johannes Cochlaeus, *Commentaria de actis et scriptis Martini Lvytheri Saxonis . . .* (Mainz: Franz Behem, 1549), 107-117.

claimed that the Revolt spelled the end of the popular support which Luther's Reformation had initially won.

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

Since the middle of the nineteenth century some Marxist scholars have followed the interpretation of Luther's relationship to the peasants first laid down by Friedrich Engels in

³ Wilhelm Stolze, "Der geistige Hintergrund des Bauernkrieges: Erasmus und Luther," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 51 (1932): 456-479.

⁴ Peter Blickle, "Communal Reformation: Zwingli, Luther, and the south of the Holy Roman Empire," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 6, Reform and Expansion 1500-1660*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75-89, esp. 76-81; cf. Peter Blickle, Peter Bierbrauer, Renate Blickle, and Claudia Ulbrich, *Aufbruch und Empörung? Studien zum bäuerlichen Widerstand im Alten Reich* (Munich: Beck, 1980), Peter Blickle, *Der Bauernkrieg. Die Revolution des Gemeinen Mannes* (Munich: Beck, 1998), and idem, *Landschaften im Alten Reich, Die Staatliche Funktion des gemeinen Mannes in Oberdeutschland* (Munich: Beck, 1973).

⁵ Franz Lau, "Der Bauernkrieg und das angebliche Ende der Lutherischen Reformation als spontaner Volksbewegung," *Lutherjahrbuch* 26, (1959), 109-34.

his classic *The German Peasant War* (1850).⁶ He elaborated the myth that Luther encouraged and then betrayed the first proletarian revolution, the rebellion of 1524-1526. This myth served to give a pseudo-historical basis for the Marxist plans for and dogma of revolution. It also helped intensify Marx's vendetta against one of the ecclesiastical establishments of his homeland, in fact one from which he sprang, the German Evangelical church. Engel's retelling of this story also reshaped the traditional picture of Luther's former student, turned sharp, spiritualist critic, Thomas Müntzer, into a caricature of the man. In addition, Marxist historians squeezed their descriptions of the actual social conditions of the time as well as the theological dimensions of Luther's critique of the peasants. It continued to dominate Marxist historical interpretation into their ideologically-determined analytical categories. This point of view, for example, in the writings of August Bebel and Karl Kautsky,⁷ until after World War II. Then the Soviet historian M. M. Smirin developed a new interpretation of Luther and the peasants. Luther had not appeared on the stage of world history at the right time to betray the proletarian revolution; he had instead been a positive figure in the unfolding of the proletarian march toward the workers' paradise by aiding the early bourgeois revolution, a necessary precursor and preparation for the proletarian revolution to come.⁸ Smirin's interpretation was taken up by the Leipzig historian Max Steinmetz,⁹ who responded positively to an approach by the Lutheran church historian Siegfried Bräuer. Bräuer's research into Müntzer, along with that of other church historians in the German Democratic Republic, laid foundations for a more accurate picture of his disinterest in the peasants and his spiritualistic religiosity.¹⁰

Luther's stance toward the peasants in 1525 also fed other myths that misrepresented what he really said and did. Enlightenment interpretations of Luther had often heralded him

⁶ Friedrich Engels, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* (London, 1850).

⁷ August Bebel, *Der Deutsche Bauernkrieg* (Braunschweig: Bracke, 1876); Karl Kautsky, *Die Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus. Bd. 2. Von 'Thomas More bis zum Vorabend der französischen Revolution* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1895).

⁸ Moisei M. Smirin, (in German translation of the original Russian, *Die Volksreformation des Thomas Münzer und der grosse Bauernkrieg*, Berlin, Dietz, 1952).

⁹ Max Steinmetz, *Deutschland von 1476 bis 1648*, Berlin, Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1965.

¹⁰ *Der Theologe Thomas Müntzer*, ed. Siegfried Bräuer and Helmar Junghans (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1989); see Helmar Junghans, *Martin Luther in Two Centuries* (Saint Paul: Lutheran Brotherhood Foundation Reformation Library, 1992), 69-85.

as the harbinger of concepts of personal freedom of which he had no inkling and which he would have rejected if he had been able to grasp them.¹¹ But out of the Enlightened tradition also developed by the twentieth century the idea that Luther was a “toady of princes,” a stooge in the service of early modern absolutist monarchs, whose support he bought by sacrificing his concern for the lowly. That stream of thinking served British, French, and U.S. American propaganda efforts against Germany in World Wars I and II. It reached its low point in the biography of Hitler composed by American journalist William Shirer.¹² More serious studies of Luther’s relationship to the princes by a number of scholars, including British church historian W. D. J. Cargill Thompson¹³ and Canadian Reformation historian James J. Estes¹⁴ have revealed a very different picture on the basis of the sources. The abiding significance and twentieth-century impact of Luther’s arguments for the right of “lower magistrates” to offer armed resistance to the emperor¹⁵ has been expounded by German-American scholar Uwe Siemon-Netto.¹⁶ Although no exposition of any historical event is without bias, it is possible to note certain circumstances in the background of Luther’s statements on the Peasants Revolt and to read his texts carefully to determine what they did state.

Too often ignored in sketching the background of Luther’s public statement is the fact that Luther resembled many of his contemporaries, and not only those charged with responsibilities of leadership in Germany in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, who had a profound fear of disorder in society. Social historians have found records of thirty-four such rebellions between 1509 and 1517, most of them local, but all of them posing a threat to

¹¹ See Walter Mostert, Art. “Luther, Martin. III. Wirkungsgeschichte,” in *Theologische Realencyklopädie*, ed. Gerhard Müller 21 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991): 570-571, 588-589.

¹² William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).

¹³ W. D. J. Cargill Thompson, “Luther and the Right of Resistance to the Emperor,” in *Studies in Church History*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 159-202, and especially his *The Political Thought of Martin Luther* (Sussex: Harvester, 1984).

¹⁴ James M. Estes, *Peace, Order and the Glory of God. Secular Authority and the Church in the Thought of Luther and Melancthon 1518-1559* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

¹⁵ Mark U. Edwards, *Luther’s Last Battles. Politics and Polemics, 1531-1546* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 20-37; W. Cargill Thompson, “Luther and the Right of Resistance to the Emperor.”

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

public order and safety. One-hundred-twelve more in the short span between 1521 and 1523 have been documented.¹⁷ The threat to public peace and stability that peasant use of violence in behalf of their claims entailed was unmistakably clear. Already in his student days at the University of Erfurt Luther had been confronted by violence from the populace. Power plays between the city's artisans and patricians, combining with the rivalry of its overlord, the archbishop of Mainz, and its neighbor, the electorate of Saxony, produced death and destruction among citizens and students in 1509-1510. Luther recalled a spiritual crisis which brought him to seek the counsel of his mentor, Johann Staupitz, when the suffering caused by the riots provoked questions about God's justice and control of human history in his mind.¹⁸ Luther had experienced the breakdown of public order in Wittenberg in 1521 when his colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt fomented riots in the streets in behalf of reform.¹⁹ Such public disobedience came from Satan's efforts to discredit the Reformation as the Last Day approached, Luther was convinced.²⁰ After the Peasants Revolt he told students at his table that the Revolt had indeed hindered the progress of reform, without giving any specific details.²¹

Luther's own background in the world of the peasants ought not be exaggerated. His father had grown up in a peasant home, probably a relatively prosperous peasant home, son of a village leader, as once Luther recounted to students at table,²² and Luther visited his relatives in the countryside from time to time. He himself grew up among mining peasants, that is, for the most part probably also people who had left agriculture for the mines and smelters of Mansfeld. Therefore, he had little reason to view the peasants of his day as particularly destitute. He did not automatically count them among the economically poor or

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

¹⁸ WATR 1:35-36, #94, LW 54:11. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, tr. James L. Schaaf, 1 (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1985):23-29.

¹⁹ Estes, *Peace*, 42-44.

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

²¹ WA TR 3:627, §2802.

²² WA TR 5:558, §6251

socially disadvantaged. Interestingly, in other areas of Germany, particularly to the northeast, the economic and social conditions of the peasantry were worse than in Saxony, but little armed protest took place there. Viewed from Luther's experience and perspective, conditions were different for the peasantry in his region of Germany than they became, for instance, in late eighteenth century France. He had some appreciation for peasant life, but he may well have had the sense of distance from the soil that often accompanies the social mobility which raises a family one step, into smelting, and another step, to the level of the university professor.

His comments on the peasantry usually were fashioned to make another point, often one of moral censure. Such critical remarks sometimes mentioned peasants alone, sometimes mentioned them among other social groups,²³ as violators of God's law. It must be remembered that what we have from Luther's talk at the supper table is what his students heard him say rather than what he actually said, and that he was often unguarded and cavalier when chatting with his students. However we evaluate the larger significance of what he said, his most frequent comments on peasants, as on nobles and townspeople, were negative. The peasants were arrogant and greedy,²⁴ but so were bankers; both groups "ride the dollar," and thereby oppress the poverty-stricken.²⁵ Peasants frequently displayed ingratitude, presumably toward God.²⁶ Once Luther vented his spleen against some unnamed scoundrels with the off-hand observation that children of nobles and townspeople were raised to be well-behaved, but that the children of peasants and princes always want to avoid punishment.²⁷

Luther particularly criticized the contempt for God's Word among the peasantry²⁸ and objected to the way they often treated village pastors. He complained about peasants who had told the governmental Visitors who came to inspect their congregations that they should not have to pay their pastors since they had to pay those who tended the sheep that supplied their physical needs, "and we must have shepherds."²⁹ He told of the pastor in Holsdorf, in

²³ WA TR TR 1, §50, p. 17.

²⁴ WA TR 3:231, §3238; cf. WA TR 3:204-205, §3163b.

²⁵ WA TR 4:99, §4046; cf. 5:513, §6149.

²⁶ WA TR 2: 100, §1435; 2:282, §1967; 2:318, §2087; 2:524-525, §2560.

²⁷ WA TR 3:415, §3564.

²⁸ WA TR 1:43-44, §115; 1:146, §352; 3:292-293, §3366.

²⁹ WA TR 4:68, §4002; cf. 2:260-261, §1909; 2:252, §2622.

Saxony, who refused to admit some peasants to the Lord's Supper because they did not know the catechism and could not pray. When this pastor admonished them, they replied that they did not have to know how to pray because they were paying the pastor to pray for them.³⁰ However, Luther grouped peasants with townspeople and nobles who also objected to their pastors' denunciation of their pride and godlessness.³¹ He could also attribute the peasants' faults to misgovernment and lack of proper discipline from the nobility;³² the princes and nobles had provoked them to rebellion, and the Peasants Revolt was only a primer on rebellion, an introduction to revolt before the catastrophe which the misgovernment of the princes and nobles was bring upon Germany.³³ Alongside all the criticism of the peasantry he made with one degree of seriousness or another to his students, it must be noted that he also praised peasants for their strong trust in God, which arose from their receiving the fruit of the earth directly.³⁴

Against this background Luther was drawn into commenting on the newest threat of peasant insurrection in the spring of 1525. After sporadic outbreaks of violence in the south German countryside, in the vicinity of the Lake of Constance, in 1524, a group of peasants near Memmingen decided to petition for the return of some of their traditional rights, that were gradually being reduced by the introduction of Roman law to replace Germanic tribal common law. Roman law had no concept of community property. That meant that what traditionally had been regarded as woodland, meadow, or creeks that belonged to the peasant community was being redefined as the property of the local noble family.³⁵ The peasants named potential arbiters for their dispute, and Luther was among them. Luther responded to the "Twelve Articles" which the Memmingen peasants published in early 1525 in April, in a treatise entitled *An Admonition to Peace. A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants*. Its beginning must have pleased the peasants, for it laid blame for "this disastrous rebellion" on princes and bishops who had oppressed their people with tyrannous measures

³⁰ WA TR 6:163, §6752.

³¹ WA TR 4:73, §4007.

³² WA TR 2:371, §2230.

³³ WA TR 5:284, 285, §5835.

³⁴ WA TR 1:193, §443.

³⁵ Gerald Strauss, *Law, Resistance, and the State. The Opposition to Roman Law in Reformation Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 56-95; Gottfried Krodel, "Luther and the Opposition to Roman Law in Germany," *Lutherjahrbuch* 58 (1991): 13-42.

and policies. Luther threatened them with God's wrath because they had not exercised their office, which demanded that they avoid injustice and properly care for the subjects whom God had entrusted to them. Their repressive measures against both the gospel of Christ and against their own subjects were calling for divine punishment.

But, on the other hand, Luther argued that God's order for his world demanded that the peasants obey governmental authorities. He also expressed his fear that resorting to violence would bring more harm to the innocent than to the guilty. Furthermore, Luther objected to their labeling their cause "Christian." He distinguished what is simply right and just in civil society, whether done by Christians and non-Christians alike, from that which is Christian.³⁶ His distinction of the realm of faith from the realm of this world's affairs informed this comment. He had expressed his distinction of the two realms quite clearly at least two years earlier, in his *On Temporal Authority*, and it had become part of his way of understanding the way in which God's creation is to function.³⁷ The Christian's claim to this-earthly rights are based on universal justice, not some special "Christian" status. Luther also expressed his anxiety over the implications for the reform of the church if reform was associated with law-breaking and the collapse of public order. Finally, Luther admonished his peasant readers that the injustices committed by governing authorities did not justify peasant injustice, which he deemed the inevitable result of revolt and the bloodshed it would produce. God, he assured readers, is with his people in their suffering, a reflection of his "theology of the cross,"³⁸ according to which God's people, like God on the cross, bear suffering in order to combat evil and promote the good. Their weapon against wrongdoing consists of prayer, not resort to arms (Rom. 12:19, 1 Cor. 6:1-2, 2 Cor. 10:4, 12:9 Matt. 5:44).

Luther confessed his own incompetence at judging the legal issues which the Memmingen articles raised, including rights to hunt, fish, use wood from forest, and the level of rents and taxes charged the peasants. He did support their petition to choose their own pastors, but if rulers refused, he offered the somewhat naïve advice that peasants should choose exile rather than rebellion. Tithes he regarded as a secular tax, even if theoretically it supported the church, and therefore, he accorded the right to set and collect it to the lords.

³⁶ WA 18:291-334, LW 46:17-43.

³⁷ WA 11:245-281, LW 45:81-129.

³⁸ See, e.g., "Luther's Theology of the Cross fifteen Years after Heidelberg:", Lectures on the Psalms of Ascent," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (forthcoming), and the literature referred to there.

The nobles also had the right to hold others in serfdom, Luther believed, concurring with the argument his supporter, Urbanus Rhegius, pastor in Augsburg, had published a few months before.³⁹ Luther's response to the peasants must have disappointed the peasants though it could not have pleased their rulers, either.⁴⁰

Luther traveled to his birthplace in Mansfeld county in early May 1525 to visit relatives and on the way was threatened by a group of peasants. This first-hand experience with the menacing mood among the rural populace and the inactivity of central German governments in regard to this deterioration of public order made Luther realize that neither his counsel to the peasants nor his call to repentance directed to the princes had found a sympathetic audience. Erfurt, the city where he had studied, and other towns were capitulating to the demands of their peasants. Peasant groups had burned and sacked castles and monasteries in several regions of Germany not far from Wittenberg. The government of electoral Saxony suffered paralysis because Elector Frederick the Wise lay on his deathbed.⁴¹

The fact that a distant group of peasants had asked him to mediate in their behalf confirmed a number of other signals that Luther was being drawn into a position of public responsibility that demanded a clear statement regarding the situation of peasant claims and peasant use of violence. He believed a sharp, harsh call for action was the only thing he could do to restore peace and stability to the general populace. He set pen to paper and composed *Against the Robbing, Murdering Hordes of Peasants*. This short treatise called on secular rulers to oppose the destruction Satan was spreading across the land like a raging fire. They could do so by restoring order through armed force. He reasoned that the leaders of the peasant uprisings had broken their feudal oaths, were fomenting violence across Germany, and were using the label "Christian brothers" to veil their disobedience to God and their harm to their neighbors. The peasants who had been compelled to join the revolt by these leaders needed to be freed from their captivity. Relying on his concept of the calling of Christians to carry out the societal responsibilities which God has placed on all people, Luther urged

³⁹ *Von leibaygenschaft oder knechthait ...*, s.l., 1525. See Robert Kolb, "The Theologians and the Peasants. Conservative Evangelical Reactions to the German Peasants Revolt," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 69 (1978): 103-31.

⁴⁰ WA18:291-334; LW46:17-43, Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther and the False Brethren* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 60-81.

⁴¹ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther, 2: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521-1532*, trans. James L. Schaff (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 172-194.

secular officials to do what God had called them to do, restore public order; they were, if necessary, to “smite, slay, and stab” those who were visiting destruction upon people and property if they did not lay down their arms and end their rebellion. Government officials acting in this role would “release, rescue, help” the rebels’ victims, also those coerced into their bands other peasants. This was all the more urgent, Luther believed, because Christ was coming soon to end this present age.⁴²

By the time Luther’s brief tract appeared in print, central German rulers had already launched their retaliation against the peasants. On May 15 the battle of Frankenhausen, the decisive engagement between peasants and rulers, left thousands dead on the battlefield. Thomas Müntzer was among them. Luther’s Roman Catholic opponents and even some of his adherents registered their indignation at his harsh words. He replied with a brief defense, entitled *An Open Letter on the Harsh Book against the Peasants*, in the summer of 1525. It maintained that the necessity of restoring public order had superseded any other considerations because all would be harmed by the chaos and arbitrary carnage of the insurgency. He rejected the criticism that he was currying the rulers’ favor and support and repeated his call to them to repent of their injustice and of their excessive use of force in suppressing the revolt, reprimanding them sharply as “furious, raving, senseless tyrants,” bloodthirsty dogs who belonged to the devil and were bound for hell.⁴³

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

Luther’s position on the Peasants Revolt is generally viewed without reference to what others were saying at the same time. A number of other Evangelical reformers issued brief treatises on the events of 1524-1526 as they were taking place as well. They included Jakob

⁴² WA18:357-361, LW46:49-55.

⁴³ WA18:384-401, LW46:63-85. Behind this treatise lies a sermon preached on June 4, 1525, “Verantwortung D. Martin Luthers auff das Büchlein wider die Reüberischen und mörderischen Bawren,” WA 17,1: 264-268.

Strauss in Eisleben, Urbanus Rhegius in Augsburg, Johannes Brenz in Schwäbisch Hall, Andreas Osiander in Nuremberg, Johannes Rurer in Ansbach, Johannes Lachmann in Heilbronn, Johann Poliander in Mansfeld, and Johannes Eberlin in Günzburg as well as two at Luther's side in Wittenberg, Philip Melanchthon and Johann Agricola. They issued brief treatises on aspects of the Peasants Revolt. Some showed more sympathy with the peasants' cause and concerns than did Luther, but they all opposed peasants' use of violence in pursuing their aims. Particularly Brenz condemned the princes for their severe punishment of rebels.⁴⁴ Some of these authors and other supporters of Luther did offer passing defenses of his stance; only Poliander dedicated an entire (though brief) publication as a rejoinder to criticism of his public statements. Poliander attributed Luther's attitude toward the Revolt to his personal experience with angry peasant mobs, to his opposition to the confusion of temporal goals with the gospel itself, and to his desire to counteract Satan's efforts to bring the preaching of the gospel into disrepute through associating Wittenberg preaching with disorder in society.⁴⁵

Whatever the extent of public comment at the time, it is remarkable how little comment Luther's stand on the Peasants Revolt elicited in the months and years immediately following, not only from Luther's followers but also from the reformer himself. Once he commented at table that the Roman Catholics had attacked his books against the peasants and the Sacramentarians, but his elaboration of this observation concentrated on how the Roman Catholics were unable themselves to answer the Sacramentarians, with no further reference to difficulties because of the treatises on the Revolt.⁴⁶

For the peasantry the suppression of this series of revolts decisively discouraged the use of armed force and diminished (though did not eliminate!⁴⁷) reports of unrest in the countryside and among laborers in the towns. In some areas rather severe suffering took place, according to Luther's own critical remarks about the bloodthirsty princes, and in general the period marked the loss of rights that had begun a generation earlier with the introduction of Roman law on a wide scale in the German empire. For Luther the Peasants

⁴⁴ Kolb, "The Theologians and the Peasants," 103-131.

⁴⁵ *Ein vrtayl Johann Polianders/ vber das hart Bu[e]chlain Doctor Martinus Luthers wider die auffrurn der Pawren/ hievor ausgegangen* (n.p., 1525).

⁴⁶ WA TR 4:653. § 5092.

⁴⁷ Blickle et al., *Aufbruch und Empörung?*, especially 50-61, 95-114, 68-187, 237-256. It is difficult to appraise how serious revolts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were, but they did not attract the same measure of reaction that the revolts of 1524-1526 did.

Revolt has been viewed by friends and foes alike as the occasion for his turning against the peasantry, with a resulting loss of support among the peasants, but neither is the case when the facts become clear. Luther wrote against rebellious peasant leaders in behalf of society as a whole and also in behalf of those peasants whom he had heard from relatives and others were being forced into participation in the risky enterprise of revolt. His position opposing violence was clear in his earlier writings, and his first response to peasant demands was clear in its rejection of all use of force on their behalf. He acted out of his own concerns both for peace, order, and tranquility in society and for the spread of the gospel without the diversion and distraction that he was sure peasant violence would cause. Once the Revolt had passed, it commanded little attention from him. Much more serious in his view were the continuing sins of the peasantry, particularly in their treatment of their pastors and in their desire to take advantage of those who purchased their products: on the basis of his own family's situation, he viewed peasants as people with a good life, not as oppressed and downtrodden people. On the other hand, he did criticize sharply rulers who did not execute justice for peasants and their other subjects, and he uncompromisingly called down God's judgment upon unjust princes and municipal authorities.

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

Luther and the Princes

In spite of – or perhaps because of – his concern for public order Luther did not submit to governing authorities with blind obedience or unconditional support. Rather he exercised sharp criticism against abuses of princely power from early in his career to the end of his day as a person exercising public responsibility. The reformer conducted running battles regarding his teaching with King Henry VIII of England before 1525⁴⁸ and with German princes, most notably Duke Georg of Saxony and Duke Heinrich of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, in subsequent years.⁴⁹ He sharply criticized their persecution of those who

⁴⁸ WA 10,2:180-262. Luther again took the occasion to criticize Henry when, in 1540 the king executed Robert Barnes, who had studied in Wittenberg, for holding the Lutheran heresy; see his preface to Barnes' confession of faith, WA 51:448-451..

⁴⁹ Edwards, *Last Battles*, 38-67, 143-62.

advocated Reformation in the Wittenberg manner. Furthermore, he wrote many “opinions” for governments across Germany and beyond, displaying independent, even if not always (from a modern perspective) informed, judgments on a wide array of public policy issues. He also composed two commentaries, on Psalm 82 and Psalm 101, which served as instruction and admonition to secular rulers, somewhat following the model of the genre called “the mirror of the prince.”⁵⁰ Sixteenth century “mirrors of princes,” such as the more famous examples by Niccolo Machiavelli, *Il Principio*, by Thomas More, *Utopia*, and Desiderius Erasmus, *Institutio principis christiani*,⁵¹ all served to present their author’s view of the structures and principles of social reality as well as directives for the proper behavior of those exercising secular authority. This tradition goes back to ancient times. Augustine reflected the Christian ideals for secular rulers in *De Civitate Dei* and other works, and from time to time throughout the Middle Ages such works were composed for a variety of reasons.⁵² Scholars give broader and narrower definitions of the genre, but all these handbooks for those in power offer advice and instruction for rulers, present or future, setting for norms, principles, and guidelines for responsible leadership, sometimes with simple dicta, sometimes with biographical examples from history or literature.⁵³

Luther composed his commentary on Psalm 82 in the weeks before the imperial diet met in 1530 in Augsburg. Political issues of several kinds loomed on the Wittenberg horizon, including that regarding the right of the princes of the empire to resist the emperor should he make war against the Protestant governments. He labeled princes “saviors, fathers, and deliverers” of their subjects. God placed them in office to give aid to these subjects, to

⁵⁰ See Robert Kolb, “Die Josef-Geschichten als Fürstenspiegel in der Wittenberger Auslegungstradition, ‘Ein weiser und verständiger Mann’ (Genesis 42,33),” in: *Christlicher Glaube und weltliche Herrschaft, zum Gedenken an Günther Wartenberg*, ed. Michael Beyer et al. (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2008), 43-46.

⁵¹ Vgl. Theo Stammen, “Fürstenspiegel als literarische Gattung politischer Theorie im zeitgenössischen Kontext – ein Versuch,” in: *Politische Tugendlehre und Regierungskunst. Studien zum Fürstenspiegel der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Hans-Otto Mühleisen und Theo Stammen (Tübingen: Niermeyer, 1990), 254-285.

⁵² Wilhelm Berges, *Die Fürstenspiegel des hohen und späten Mittelalters* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1938).

⁵³ Bruno Singer, *Die Fürstenspiegel in Deutschland im Zeitalter des Humanismus und der Reformation* (Munich: Fink, 1981).

provide for them and protect them and to support the church without interfering in its conduct of the preaching of God's Word.⁵⁴

Luther's interpretation of the term "the gods" in verse 1 identified them as secular rulers, whom God has put in place as part of his order for the world. Luther attacked the medieval view of the relationship between the papacy and the clergy, on the one side, and those responsible for secular government, on the other. He maintained that the light of the gospel as the Wittenberg reformers were proclaiming it had finally informed German society of the proper relationship between the two and ended the claims that popes, priests, and monks could exact obedience from governmental authorities. The congregation of God's people is to obey secular government because God commanded it; secular government is obliged by God's calling to practice justice and preserve peace. God's Word stands over both the clergy and the rulers, and the law of God threatens and condemns both disobedient subjects and arrogant princes.⁵⁵

Scholars distinguish between advice given to princes for knowing what is right, or virtuous, and instruction on how to carry out their office wisely, with the proper practical activities.⁵⁶ Luther's treatment of Psalm 82 concentrated on the proper activities of the ruler. They consist of "doing justice to the God-fearing and thwarting the wicked," or promoting the preaching of God's Word and the salvation of many people; aiding and supporting the poor, suffering, orphans and widows, and giving them justice; and protecting subjects from every kind of attack and evil, establishing and preserving peace.⁵⁷ Luther then condemned three princely vices: doing nothing to promote God's Word, not giving proper attention to their governing responsibilities and thus not providing justice and protection to the poor and needy; and practicing a sinful way of life, conducting their office in a selfish manner, as if God had

⁵⁴ WA 31 I, 189-218; cf. James M. Estes, *Peace, Order and the Glory of God. Secular Authority and the Church in the Thought of Luther and Melancthon 1518-1558* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 181-188.

⁵⁵ WA 31 I, 191, 32-36, 189, 21 - 190, 24; 193, 7 - 196, 3. Cf. Estes, *Peace*, 1-52; 179-212; Cargill Thompson, *Political Thought of Martin Luther*, 1-78; Paul Althaus, *Die Ethik Martin Luthers* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1965), 116-158.

⁵⁶ Maigler-Loeser, *Historie*, 11.

⁵⁷ WA 31 I, 199, 4-5, 200, 5-6, 201, 26-27; vgl. 205, 19-18.

given them their authority for their use and honor, their own desires and arrogance, their own pride and splendor, and they have no obligation to help or serve anyone.”⁵⁸

Luther emphasized that preachers of God’s Word are also obligated to call governing officials to repentance. “It would lead to much more rebellion if preachers would not condemn the vices of their rulers,” he wrote. For failing to hold rulers accountable makes the mob angry and discontented, and it also strengthens the tyrants’ wickedness. The preachers become accomplices of such evil and bring guilt upon themselves when they avoid such a preaching of repentance to government officials. For “the office of the Word is not the office of a courtier or a hired hand. He is God’s servant and minion.”⁵⁹ Luther’s political theory in this treatise, as in all his comment on secular government, proceeded from his concept of the walks of life which constitute human existence and its social structures as well as the responsibilities God has built into each. God exercises his providence and his rule through his human creatures as they fulfill the callings he has given them in life.

Four years later, in 1534, Luther again wrote a commentary on a psalm, Psalm 101, and fashioned it into a “mirror of the prince.” The reformer’s close friend, Elector Johann, had died; his son Johann Friedrich the Elder had assumed the throne in 1532. Johann Friedrich had grown up at his parents’ court, where Luther was considered a special prophet of God. The young prince admired the reformer very much, and Luther seems to have been fond of his new prince even if not so closely bound to him as he had been to Johann Friedrich’s father. Indeed, the reformer did not hesitate to criticize Johann Friedrich’s advisors and even the elector himself.⁶⁰ That criticism emerges gently but firmly in the commentary on the psalm.⁶¹ It is true that the stated purpose of the treatise was to reject the

⁵⁸ WA 31 I, 214, 20 - 215, 12.

⁵⁹ WA 31 I, 196, 19 - 198, 18, bes. 197, 3-198, 2 und 198, 12-13.

⁶⁰ On the relationship between the electoral court and the team of reformers around Luther, see Günther Wartenberg, “Luthers Beziehungen zu den sächsischen Fürsten,” in: *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546*, ed. Helmar Junghans (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983), 554-561; Georg Mentz, *Johann Friedrich der Grossmächtige, 1503-1554* (Jena: Fischer, 1903-1908), 1:30-41. On the relationship of Elector Johann Friedrich and his estates with the faculty at Wittenberg in introducing reforms, see Siegrid Westphal, “Die Ausgestaltung des Kirchenwesens unter Johann Friedrich – ein landesherrliches Kirchenregiment?,” in: *Johann Friedrich I. – der Lutherische Kurfürst*, ed. Völker Leppin et al., (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2006), 261-280.

⁶¹ WA 51, 200-264; on the implicit critique of the elector, see p. 198, in the introduction by E. Thiele und O. Brenner. Cf. Estes, *Peace, Order*, 193-205.

claims of the upper clergy, who daily sing the psalms, including Psalm 101, but who slander temporal rulers every day and “practically trample on them with their feet.”⁶² However, throughout the treatise secular princes among the readers are admonished to follow the pattern of life described in the psalm; its descriptions of the ideal prince from David’s pen serve as a textbook for ruling officials, according to Luther. David is the true “model of the proper ruler.”⁶³ Luther forthrightly discussed David’s sins, including his sins in the conduct of his office of ruler of Israel, for example, in commenting on Psalm 51,⁶⁴ but here he ignored his flaws and vices: “dear David is so highly gifted and such a wonderful, special hero, that he is not only innocent of all deception and murder, which took place in his realm, but he opposed such liars and murderers and could not tolerate them. He turned on them so that they had to yield,”⁶⁵ an interpretation of the Israelite king’s life that stands, at least in part, at odds with the biblical record and Luther’s own judgment elsewhere.

The king’s depiction of the good ruler in this psalm corresponded to Luther’s understanding of the two realms. The psalm presents “many fine princely virtues which [David] practiced. This psalm does not deal with how we should serve God but rather how we should do what is right to other people, to each person in an appropriate way. Just as in the spiritual realm or with spiritual responsibilities people are instructed how to act toward God in proper fashion and receive salvation, so the earthly realm gives instructions on how people should act and govern themselves among other people, so that body, property, honor, wife, child, house, home and all other blessings may remain in peace and security and prosper on earth.”⁶⁶ In general, Luther praised the virtues of self-discipline, humility, diligence, and above all fear reverence toward God as the most desirable characteristics of the ruler.

Also in this treatise Luther insisted on the right and obligation of preachers to admonish princes and their counselors. “When a preacher exercises his office and says to

⁶² WA 51, 201, 2-3.

⁶³ The phrase is from Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther*, 9. WA 51, 227, 37-38. Vgl. Wolfgang Sommer, *Gottesfurcht und Fürstenherrschaft: Studien zum Obrigkeitsverständnis Johann Arndts und lutherischer Hofprediger zur Zeit der altprotestantischen Orthodoxie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 23-73.

⁶⁴ See his draft of 1532, WA 31,1:539,5-540,2; the printed version of the 1532 lectures contains similar and more extensive comments, WA 40,2: 317,34-327,28; 330,22-350,28; 415,24-417,17.

⁶⁵ WA 51, 234, 12-16, 235, 10-16.

⁶⁶ WA 51, 241, 31-42.

kings and princes and the entire world, “Remember, fear God and obey his commandments,” he is not interfering with temporal authority, but he is serving it and is obedient to the highest authority by doing this. The entire spiritual realm is nothing other than service to God’s authority. That is why [preachers] are called God’s footsoldiers and Christ’s servants in Scripture.”⁶⁷

Luther presented his high standards for princely performance in other writings to the end of his life. One example may suffice. His treatment of Joseph as a ruling official in Egypt in his Genesis commentary, particularly on 41:33-51 and 47:12-26, set forth for Wittenberg students a model for preaching to their own congregations so that they would properly exercise their responsibility to call governing officials to repentance.⁶⁸ Joseph’s story reminded Luther that God wishes to combat the devil and to maintain peace and order through the virtuous individuals who serve society as governing authorities.⁶⁹ “If I do not respect the political authorities, I cannot live in security, protected from robbers, and am alienated from my neighbor. Therefore, it is to my advantage to honor princes and pastors, so that I can live a peaceful and upright life and can practice piety and useful skills. That all is connected with God’s will and society’s needs.”⁷⁰ But even more often Luther pointed to Joseph in demonstrating to his students how they should urge virtue upon the rulers who heard their preaching and how they should condemn those rulers’ vices.

Luther believed that Joseph’s example demonstrated that the good ruler is first of all a good human being. That means that his prime virtue is trust in God, a model for life that Luther presented in his *Large Catechism*, beginning with the central role of the first commandment.⁷¹ Joseph’s example admonishes rulers to fear God, practice humility, and follow the will of God,⁷² always remembering that he owes everything to God, who governs

⁶⁷ WA 51, 240, 7-12.

⁶⁸ The following material is taken from Kolb, “Josef-Geschichten,” 46-52.

⁶⁹ WA 44, 435, 30-33.

⁷⁰ WA 44, 437, 8-12; vgl. WA 44, 440, 33 - 441, 2.

⁷¹ *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (11. ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 560-567; *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 386-392.

⁷² WA 44, 433, 15-26.

each human life and all of human history. He turned the evil Joseph's brothers committed against him to good for Joseph, his entire family, and the nation of Egypt.⁷³

Joseph practiced many other virtues as well, including those virtues that Moses would later demonstrate in addition to his spiritual strength, including diligence, wisdom, and courage.⁷⁴ Joseph advised Pharaoh to find a man of understanding and wisdom (Gen 41:33), and that Pharaoh did by picking Joseph himself. Luther defined wisdom as embracing the ability to make good judgments, thoroughness, and perspicuity, with the ability logically to avoid false conclusions, sophistries, and other intellectual traps.⁷⁵

Luther reminded his hearers that their princes should be bold, defying the devil himself, through the power of the Holy Spirit, even as Joseph had laughed at death and hell with the courage of a lion when he was in prison.⁷⁶ Humility and moderation belong to the good ruler; pride and arrogance are the devil's poison.⁷⁷ Joseph's example should encourage rulers to fear God, hold themselves in low regard, and love other people as Joseph did when he showed sympathy for his brothers.⁷⁸ These characteristics lead good rulers to support subjects with temporal blessings, discipline the unruly, defend the suffering, and punish the guilty. That is possible only with faith in God and humility before him.⁷⁹

On the basis of Joseph's example Luther sharply criticized princely tyranny and negligence in office. Their ambition and arrogance enflame them against God and their people.⁸⁰ They do not listen to the proclamation of God's Word, and they fail to exercise their rule properly. They ignore crime.⁸¹ They fail to support the church and its pastors.⁸² They raise taxes unreasonably.⁸³ Worse than the princes were their counselors. Those who were efficient in the

⁷³ WA 44, 421, 39 - 422, 4, 422, 14-16, 31-33.

⁷⁴ WA 44, 428, 10-11, vgl. WA 44, 437, 32-36.

⁷⁵ WA 44, 415, 15-21.

⁷⁶ WA 44, 425, 22-39, and 427, 18-22; cf. WA 44, 428, 11 - 16; 444, 10-11, 32-39.

⁷⁷ WA 44, 432, 26-28.

⁷⁸ WA 44, 434, 26 - 435, 27.

⁷⁹ WA 44, 433, 26 - 434, 10.

⁸⁰ WA 44, 665, 3-7, 436, 27-31.

⁸¹ WA 44, 667, 32-35.

⁸² WA 44, 670, 28 - 671, 18.

⁸³ WA 44, 417, 33 - 418,6.

exercise of their duties too often administered their responsibilities to their own benefit rather than the benefit of their princes' subjects, for whom they were supposed to be ruling. They resembles wolves, foxes, vultures, and other birds of prey in their striving for their own advantage.⁸⁴ He directly criticized Johann Friedrich's court for its wastefulness to his students in the context of his exposition of the story of Joseph.⁸⁵ Luther was coming to the end of his life as he delivered his lectures on Joseph. For two decades he had taught students to be prepared to admonish the governmental officials whom they would serve for the benefit of their subjects. From the pulpit and in print he had proclaimed God's law to public officials, demanding that they exercise their God-given offices for the welfare of those whom God had entrusted to their political care.

Although Luther never ceased mentioning the need for peasants to repent, he called much more often and more forcefully for princes to repent, of a variety of sins, including their tyranny over the peasantry. Luther did not treat any social grouping of late medieval society preferentially; apart from the very concrete circumstances of their specific callings, his message for all focused on repentance for wrong-doing, forgiveness of sins, and proper exercise of personal responsibility according to God's commands within their respective callings. Against peasants he conveyed the message of God's wrath even as he called on them to embrace of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in Jesus Christ. He delivered the same message to those with political authority as well as townspeople, merchants and artisans alike. When he singled out peasants from people in general, it was always in references to specific sins or their need for the gospel. The reaction of Luther to the Peasants Revolt must be understood in this context and not viewed apart from his continuing call for repentance and admonition to justice which he delivered to those with political power. That simply reflects his understanding of God's order for human life and of his own calling.

⁸⁴ WA 44, 416, 13-17.

⁸⁵ WA 44, 451, 40 - 452, 5.