"[Luther] leaps off the page in a vivid array of colours... The work of one of the most imaginative and pioneering historians of our generation."

—The Guardian

MARTIN LUTHER
RENEGADE
and
PROPHET

LYNDAL ROPER
BY LYNDAL ROPER

Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet

Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany

Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Religion, and Sexuality in Early Modern Europe

The Witch in the Western Imagination

The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg
MARTIN LUTHER
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For my father
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INTRODUCTION

For Protestants it is almost an article of faith that the Reformation began when Martin Luther, the shy monk, nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, the eve of All Saints’ Day, and set in motion a religious revolution that shattered Western Christendom. For Luther’s closest collaborator, Philipp Melanchthon, to whom we owe the trenchant description of the event, the posting of the theses advanced the restoration of the “light of the gospel.” Luther himself liked to celebrate the moment as the beginning of the Reformation, and drank a toast to it with friends later in life.¹

A little historical debunking, especially with events of such significance, is always salutary. As the Catholic historian Erwin Iserloh pointed out in 1962, Luther himself never mentioned the event, but said only that he sent letters to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz and the bishop of Brandenburg, Hieronymus Scultetus, in which he condemned the abuses of selling papal indulgences in forthright tones, and enclosed his theses.² The story that he posted them on the door of the Castle Church has come down to us through Melanchthon and Luther’s secretary, Georg Rörer, but neither of them was in Wittenberg at the time to witness the event.³ Others have suggested that, far less dramatically, the theses might have been stuck to the door, rather than nailed to it.⁴

Whether Luther used a nail or a pot of glue will probably never be known for sure, but it is certain that he sent the theses to Archbishop Albrecht, the most important churchman in all Germany, on Octo-
ber 31. The accompanying letter had a tone of remarkable self-confidence, even of arrogance. After an obsequious opening, it roundly condemned the archbishop’s lack of care for his flock and threatened that if Albrecht did not take action, then “someone may rise and, by means of publications, silence those preachers” who were selling indulgences that promised the buyers time off Purgatory. Luther wrote a similar letter to his immediate superior, the bishop of Brandenburg, and, more than the posting of the theses in a backwater like Wittenberg, these letters were the provocation that ensured a response. One of Luther’s talents, evident even then, was his ability to stage an event, to do something spectacular that would get him noticed.

Luther’s Reformation sundered the unity of the Catholic Church forever, and can even be credited with starting the process of secularization in the West, as Catholicism lost its monopoly in large parts of Europe. Yet it all began in a most unlikely place. The tiny new University of Wittenberg was struggling to make its name; the town itself was a building site of “muddy houses, unclean lanes, every path, step and street full of mud.” It was situated at the end of the earth, as southern humanists scoffed, far away from grand imperial cities like Strasbourg, Nuremberg, or Augsburg, with their connections to fashionable Italy. Even Luther remarked that it was so distant from civilization that “a little further, and it would be in barbarian country.” And the man himself was an unlikely revolutionary. Just short of his thirty-fourth birthday, Luther had been a monk for twelve years, working his way up through the Augustinian order and becoming a trusted administrator and university professor. He had published almost nothing, and his experience of public writing was restricted largely to theses for disputation, works of exegesis, and ghostwriting sermons for lazy colleagues. Although the Church was slow to respond, the Ninety-five Theses took Germany by storm. There was a huge readership for them, lay as well as clerical. In just two months they were known all over Germany, and soon beyond it.

Whatever really happened on October 31, 1517, there is no doubting the significance of the theses themselves: The Reformation truly was sparked by a single text. Theses were sets of numbered proposi-
tions designed for an academic debate, although in this case that debate never occurred and Luther probably never intended it to. They were not composed in continuous prose, nor were they statements of truth; rather they set out hypothetical claims to be tested through subsequent argument, and were terse to the point of being difficult to understand. Few copies of Luther’s text survive, and there are none from Wittenberg itself..Printed single-sided on a large sheet of paper, they were meant to be posted on a wall—which suggests there may be some truth in the story of the church door—even though the size of the typeface would make them difficult to read. At the top, in a larger font, is an invitation in Luther’s name that these theses should be debated at Wittenberg.

The first begins with the words “When our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ said ‘do penance’ he willed the whole life of a believer to be one of repentance.” The Latin puts the emphasis on the main verb—voluit—on what Christ willed the believer’s life to be. Luther goes straight on to say that this cannot be interpreted to mean simply performing the devotional penalties that a priest might impose, such as saying prayers, or indeed, buying indulgences. The statement is deceptive in its simplicity; in fact, it implied a root-and-branch critique of the whole edifice of the late medieval Church.

How could such a simple message have such implications and cause such uproar? Luther was not even the first or the only person to criticize indulgences; Luther’s confessor, the Augustinian Johann von Staupitz, for example, had done so in sermons in 1516. At one level, Luther was simply articulating a long-standing position on the nature of grace that went back to St. Augustine: the idea that our own good deeds can never ensure salvation, and that we must rely on God’s mercy. Luther, however, alleged that the sacrament of confession was being perverted from a spiritual exercise into a monetary transaction. What sparked his anger, so he later reminisced, was the preaching of a Dominican friar, Johannes Tetzel, in the nearby town of Jüterbog, who went so far as to claim that his indulgences were so efficacious that even if a person had raping the Virgin Mary they would be assured complete remission from Purgatory. Still, the issue of indulgences was a lively subject of theological and political debate,
and initially, some saw the indulgences controversy as little more than one of the frequent spats between the monastic orders, part of the old rivalry between Dominicans and Luther’s Augustinians.

But it was much more. By arguing that Christians could not earn their way out of Purgatory through good works, viewing relics, or acquiring indulgences, Luther was assaulting the medieval Church’s claim to be able to grant forgiveness and facilitate salvation through the dispensation of the sacraments. For him, such practices showed a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of sin, repentance, and salvation. The Protestant chronicler Friedrich Myconius later recorded that some of Luther’s parishioners had complained that he “would not absolve them, because they showed no true penitence nor reform” and had appeared with letters of indulgence from Tetzel as they “did not want to desist from adultery, whoredom, usury, unjust goods and such sins and evil.”

By attacking the understanding of penance, Luther was implicitly striking at the heart of the papal Church, and its entire financial and social edifice, which worked on a system of collective salvation that allowed people to pray for others and so reduce their time in Purgatory. It financed a whole clerical proletariat of priests paid to recite anniversary Masses for the souls of the deceased. It paid for pious laywomen in poorhouses who said prayers for the souls of the dead, to ease their path through Purgatory. It paid for brotherhoods that prayed for their members, said Masses, undertook processions, and financed special altars. In short, the system structured the religious and social lives of most medieval Christians. At its center was the Pope, who was the steward of a treasury of “merits”—grace that could be disbursed to others. Attacking indulgences, therefore, would sooner or later lead to a questioning of papal power.

No one compelled people to buy indulgences, but there was a huge market for them. When the indulgence-sellers arrived at a town:

the papal bull [the charter approving the indulgence, with the Pope’s lead seal affixed] would be carried about on a satin or golden cloth, and all the priests, monks, town council, schoolmaster, schoolboys, men, women, maidens and children all met it singing in procession
with flags and candles. All the bells were rung, all the organs were played . . . [the indulgence-seller] was led into the churches and a red cross was erected in the middle of the church where the papal banner would be hung.¹¹

So efficiently organized was the system that the indulgences were even printed locally on parchment that could be filled in with the name of the person on whose behalf they were purchased.

Part of the explosiveness of Luther’s Ninety-five Theses lay in the timing of their appearance. On the feast day of All Saints, the magnificent collection of relics belonging to the Elector Friedrich, ruler of Saxony and Luther’s sovereign, were displayed in Wittenberg’s Castle Church to pilgrims from miles around and indulgences granted to all who viewed them. The theses were probably posted on or just before this celebration. True, illiterate pilgrims could not have read them, and even literate townsfolk would have been hard-pressed to understand them. But the recipients of Luther’s letter would have fully grasped the significance of the date, as would his fellow theologians at Wittenberg. For the latter, the theses touched on their own livelihoods, as the university depended on funding from the All Saints foundation, derived from the saying of Masses for the dead and from the pilgrims who came to see the relics in order to gain time off Purgatory.

What Luther did not know at the time was that the particular “indulgence scandal” he attacked involved much more than the crude preaching of Johannes Tetzel, whose advertising jingle allegedly ran “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs.” Rather, Tetzel’s activities fed into a series of fundamental practices that financed the Church. The money raised by the preacher was supposed to go to Rome, to pay for the rebuilding of St. Peter’s. In fact, half of it was going directly to the Fugger banking family in Augsburg, the richest merchant capitalists of the day, to whom Albrecht of Mainz owed money. The younger son of a powerful princely family, Albrecht had become archbishop of Magdeburg at the age of twenty-three. But then there had been an unexpected vacancy in the archbishopric of Mainz, the richest of the German sees. This was not
a chance to miss, but the papacy was trying to stop bishops amassing multiple offices and, after Albrecht’s succession to Magdeburg, had also ordered that henceforth bishops would have to be at least thirty years old.¹²

The conflict was resolved in Albrecht’s favor when he agreed to pay a contribution of 21,000 ducats to support the building of St. Peter’s, money he did not have. So he borrowed from the Fuggers, even though their involvement in monopoly capitalism was regarded as usury by the Church. He then moved to divert money, such as that collected by Tetzel, into paying the debt. Luther’s theses, in other words, attacked not only papal power, but also, unbeknownst to him, one of the most powerful people in Germany and the richest financial house in Europe.

In the short run, not much happened in response to the Ninety-five Theses. No disputation took place. The bishop of Brandenburg does not seem to have answered Luther’s letter. Instead, when Luther sent him his fuller explanations and defense of the theses, the bishop recommended a delay in publication, which Luther appears to have—mistakenly—believed showed sympathy for his ideas. Albrecht of Mainz was away in Aschaffenburg when the theses arrived, but did not reply either when he eventually received them. Instead, he sent the document to the University of Magdeburg for theological judgment, and then on to Rome. This step ensured that the theses would become a serious matter by triggering a papal investigation for heresy. Albrecht’s bureaucratic act meant that the matter was no longer an issue affecting a small part of Germany: It had become an event concerning the universal Church.

Luther’s life and habits were very parochial. He was born in Eisleben in Saxony, and by strange chance, he died there, too. He was brought up in the mining town of Mansfeld, seven miles to the north, went to university in Erfurt, forty-five miles to the southwest, and spent most of the rest of his life in Wittenberg, fifty miles to the northeast. He only once ventured outside the boundaries of the Holy
Roman Empire, when he visited Rome, and this merely provided a fount of antipapal anecdotes and nourished his intolerance of everything that was not German. He traveled widely within Saxony, but when he was placed under imperial ban he was unable to venture farther afield where he would not have the protection of the Saxon ruler. By the end of his life, he was further confined by poor health, reliant on a little cart even to get to church to preach. However, he developed a network of correspondents and pastors, whose appointments he had arranged and whose careers he furthered, which spanned the empire and beyond. And the effects of his Reformation spread from Germany to Italy, England, France, the Scandinavian lands, and Eastern Europe.

The outlines of his biography are simply told. His childhood was unremarkable, except in one respect: He came from a mining area. The economy of mining was very different from the world of craft workshops and small enterprises that characterized most sixteenth-century towns, the environment that formed so many humanists and scholars. Luther's family invested in their son's education and destined him for the law, a profession that would have helped protect the family's mining enterprise. But in 1505, to his father's dismay, the young man gave up his legal studies and entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt. There he came under the influence of Johann von Staupitz, a leading Augustinian instrumental in establishing the new University of Wittenberg, who persuaded the young monk to move to higher studies in theology and obtain a doctorate. Progressing steadily up the rungs of the order, Luther eventually succeeded to Staupitz's university position and became active in reforming the university. Then, in 1517, the Ninety-five Theses burst upon the world.

The theses did not contain a full theological program; rather, Luther was radicalized by the opposition he encountered, and the arguments and attacks of others made him develop his theology and pursue his ideas further. The Reformation emerged through a series of disputations and arguments with his antagonists at Heidelberg, Augsburg, and Leipzig. Luther knew that the penalty for heresy would be burning at the stake, and that if he was imprisoned and
tried by the Church he was likely to lose his life. This meant that his theology was formed under the double pressure of increasingly aggressive argument from his opponents and the threat of martyrdom.

In 1521 Luther, now known throughout Germany, was called upon to answer to the emperor at the Diet of Worms in front of the assembled estates of the entire empire. Many thought he would not take the risk of attending, but as he said, nothing would stop him, even if he had known that there were “as many devils as . . . tiles on the roofs.” The courage he showed at Worms was breathtaking. For a commoner to stand up to the emperor and the most powerful princes in the empire, and to resist the might of the Church, was as extraordinary as it was unforgettable. A defining event, it probably did more to win people over to the Reformation, and shape their hopes and expectations, than did his theology. As in any revolutionary movement, Luther’s ideas were magnified and refracted through what people heard in the street or in sermons, or through news of what he did.

The Diet concluded with the emperor’s emphatic condemnation. On the way back from Worms, Luther, now in mortal danger, was kidnapped on the instructions of his ruler and protector Friedrich the Wise, and taken for his safety to the Wartburg Castle, where he spent the next ten months in isolation, writing furiously and translating the New Testament. In the meantime, the Reformation at Wittenberg proceeded apace without him and, under the guidance of Andreas Karlstadt, became increasingly radical, addressing issues of poor relief and morality. When Luther returned to Wittenberg in March 1522, he immediately called for the reforms to be reversed because they had happened too fast. He also broke decisively with Karlstadt, who had begun to take a different line on the Lord’s Supper, arguing that Christ was not actually present in the bread and wine, a view Luther passionately rejected.

This split presaged the future, for people applied his theology, as they perceived it, to their own experience—a process Luther might oppose, but which was beyond his control. As the Reformation spread it also began to fragment, as many people in south Germany, the Swiss towns, Silesia, and even within Saxony, were persuaded by
those who denied that the body of Christ was truly present in Communion. In towns and villages throughout the empire, people began to demand gospel freedom, to insist on appointing evangelical preachers, and to overturn established authorities. Just as Luther’s antagonists had predicted from the very start, his message brought revolution. In 1524, the Peasants’ War broke out, the greatest uprising yet seen in German lands and unequaled in Europe until the French Revolution. Luther at first seemed to rebuke both sides evenhandedly, castigating the peasants while, like an Old Testament prophet, also criticizing the rulers, but he eventually gave his support to the princes. With this stance, the social conservatism of Luther’s Reformation became apparent.

While the Peasants’ War was at its height, Luther determined to marry, “to spite the Devil,” as he explained—surely one of the strangest justifications a new bridegroom ever gave. The marriage was indeed shocking, but its audacity was as much a challenge to the Church as it was to the Devil. He was a priest and a monk, while his bride, Katharina von Bora, was a nun: They had both taken vows of celibacy. No longer the sallow, ascetic monk, Luther entered a new phase of life, and soon became a father. He did not have to leave the now-deserted monastery, however: The Saxon rulers simply conferred the buildings on him and his heirs. There his household, with its assortment of visitors, students, and colleagues, became the temple of the evangelical parsonage on a grand scale.

The new Church still needed to be established, and in 1530, Emperor Charles V held another Diet on German soil, this time at Augsburg. It was now clear that there could be no accommodation between Lutherans and the Catholics; but the Reformation itself was by this time also split over Communion, and Luther’s opponents were not given a voice at the Diet. The final years of Luther’s life were dominated by attempts to reach some sort of agreement with the “sacramentarians.” A precarious accord was finally reached, but it left Luther convinced that he had been right all along—a psychological dynamic that stored up future trouble for the movement. At the same time, his antipapal rhetoric became increasingly bitter. His denunciation of the Pope as the Antichrist hardened to a fundamen-
tal axiom of his theology, and his declining years were further marked by violent disputes with erstwhile followers and furious diatribes against the Jews. After Luther’s death, splits emerged between different wings of his own movement, leading to a legacy of division within Lutheranism where each side passionately claimed his authority.

These are the external facts, but they do not convey Luther’s inner development, which is the abiding focus of this book. How did he have the inner strength to resist the emperor and estates at Worms? What drove him to this point? Why did he break with Andreas Karlstadt, his close supporter in the early years of the Reformation? Why did Luther, time after time, fall out with those with whom he had worked most closely, creating scaring enmities and leaving his followers terrified that they might also incur his wrath? How did the man who had been convinced that ‘they won’t wish a wife on me’ become the model of the married pastor? This book charts the emotional transformations wrought by the religious changes Luther set in motion. For Luther’s personality had huge historical effects—for good and ill. It was his remarkable courage and sense of purpose that created the Reformation, and it was his stubbornness and capacity to demonize his opponents that nearly destroyed it.

Psychohistory has long had a bad press due to its tendency to explain complex personalities and historical processes in terms of basic patterns set in early childhood. Luther’s life has inspired some of the most famous psychobiographies, including Erik Erikson’s Young Man Luther and Erich Fromm’s chapter on the reformer in his The Fear of Freedom. Both men were psychoanalysts. Erikson was also a developmental psychologist who worked with adolescents, and his lively book, published in postwar America, remains a classic; but one of the most important features of Luther’s Reformation is that it was not that of a young man. As this book will argue, although Luther’s relationship to his father was fundamental to his personality and his religiousness, and although his understanding of paternal relations pervades his theology, father figures were only part of what shaped him.

It may seem foolhardy to attempt a psychoanalytically influenced
biography of the very man whose biography has become a byword for the worst kinds of reductionist history. Such an approach, it could be contended, risks overestimating the role of individual agency in much the same way that sixteenth-century Lutheran hagiography did, making it impossible to understand why Luther’s ideas might have appealed to so many and how they created a social movement. It could be further argued that it also cheapens theology, reducing major ideas to the outcomes of unconscious wishes or conflicts, and making it impossible for us to grasp why ideas about the presence of God in the sacrament or the nature of repentance should have become so urgent.

However, the wealth of material that has survived on Luther is so great that we probably know more about his inner life than about that of any other sixteenth-century individual, allowing us to trace his relationships with his friends and colleagues through his correspondence and even to examine his dreams. His collected works, the famous Weimar Edition, extend to 120 volumes, including 11 volumes of letters and 6 volumes of his dinner-table conversations. Where many historians have used this abundance of material to trace his theological development in detail, and to date specific events with greater accuracy, I want to understand Luther himself. I want to know how a sixteenth-century individual perceived the world around him, and why he viewed it in this way. I want to explore his inner landscapes so as to better understand his ideas about flesh and spirit, formed in a time before our modern separation of mind and body. In particular, I am interested in Luther’s contradictions. Here was a man who made some of the most misogynistic remarks of any thinker, yet who was in favor not only of sex within marriage but crucially that it should also give bodily pleasure to both women and men. Trying to understand this apparent paradox is a challenge I have not been able to resist.

A man of immense charisma, Luther’s passionate friendships were matched by equally unrelenting rejections of those he believed to be wrong or disloyal. His theology sprang from his character, a connection that Melanchthon, one of the first of his biographers and his closest co-worker, insisted upon: “His character was, almost, so to
speak, the greatest proof” of his doctrine. Luther’s theology becomes more alive as we connect it to his psychological conflicts, expressed in his letters, sermons, treatises, conversations, and biblical exegesis. Such a rereading of the original sources, which sets aside the accretions of denominational scholarship, will show us why seemingly remote and abstruse theological questions mattered so deeply to him and his contemporaries, and in what ways they may still be important to us today. Drawing on the insights of psychoanalysis thus yields a richer understanding not only of Luther the man but also of the revolutionary religious principles to which he dedicated his life, the legacies of which are still so powerful.

This book is not a general history of the Reformation, or even of the Reformation in Wittenberg; still less can it provide an overall interpretation of what became Lutheranism. It does argue, however, that our understanding of the Reformation in German lands has been distorted by the preoccupation of Western postwar scholarship with the cities of the south. This is a legacy of the Cold War, when historians of the West found it hard to use archives in the East, while their colleagues in the German Democratic Republic were interested at first more in social movements and in the legacy of the religious radical and revolutionary Thomas Müntzer than in Luther. As a result, the social history of Lutheranism is still underdeveloped, and we lack the kind of rich, nuanced account of the progress of the movement that we have for the major cities of the south. Because West German historians after the war were so eager to identify a democratic lineage in their own past, they idealized the free independent cities with their elected councils. They wished to escape the deadening equation of the Reformation with political conformism and obedience, by pointing to the variety of local, popular Reformations, with ideas about the sacrament, images, and social reform very different from those of Luther. But the result has been that our account of the Reformation has been skewed. We lack a proper assessment of Lutheranism in its home social and cultural context, which was so unlike that of the southern cities: Its political values and its economic structures were not those of the south. Nor do we understand how Lutheranism developed in dialogue with what became reformed religion, the pre-
cursor of Calvinism, through bitter enmities and tragic broken friendships. This is an absence this book cannot repair, but I hope to suggest a new and unexpected approach to Luther’s theology by placing him in the social and cultural context that formed him.

LUTHER has been part of my life for longer than I care to admit. He was a feature of my childhood, because my father was for a few years a Presbyterian minister. I was only briefly a daughter of the manse, but I saw the toll that living a family life in public took on both my parents. The strange black cassock and gown seemed to transform my father into another being. He had a study lined from floor to ceiling with works of theology, but the congregation hankered after his predecessor, who had been less intellectual. All this confronted me with issues of authority—the authority the congregation invested in my father; the seriousness conferred by the pulpit and the heavy black robes, so unsuited to the Australian climate; and the strain this role put on him. We were set apart, and yet we were humilitatingly dependent—nothing could be repaired in the manse and no furnishings could be chosen except with the agreement of the congregation, one of whom opined, “You don’t need carpets to do the work of God.”

By a quirk of historical accident, the Melbourne Presbyterian Church at that time was more influenced by Luther than it was by its ostensible founder, John Calvin, because several Australian university theologians had studied in Tübingen with Lutheran professors. Some years later, when my father had left the Church and I was beginning doctoral research, I studied in Tübingen myself with Professor Heiko Oberman, a Dutch scholar who had established the Institute for Late Middle Ages and Reformation and whose work was transforming our understanding of late medieval theology. In my first semester I attended the lectures that would become his study of Luther, a classic that is still to my mind the best biography of the man. And it was while I was at Tübingen that Hans Küng, a Catholic professor at the university, lost his license to teach Catholic theology because he had questioned papal infallibility. It seemed that the questions of author-
ity, freedom, and obedience, which Luther had raised centuries ago, were very much alive. These were burning issues that kept Lutheran theology at the center of my intellectual and personal concerns.

Most biographies of Luther are written by church historians. The great exception is the magnificent recent biography by the historian Heinz Schilling, the first to put Luther in a more rounded historical context and to give equal weight to his opponent Charles V. I am not a church historian but I am a historian of religion, shaped by the social and cultural history of the last decades, and by the feminist movement in particular. I do not wish to idolize Luther or to denigrate him; nor do I wish to make him consistent. I want to understand him and make sense of the convulsions that he and Protestantism unleashed, not just in relation to authority and obedience, but also in regard to the relations between the sexes and how men and women perceived their physical existence.

When I began graduate study, there were very few studies by Western scholars of the Lutheran regions of the Reformation in eastern Germany, owing to the division of the country at the time. One of the few exceptions was the late Bob Scribner, who wrote his PhD on the Reformation in Erfurt and who would become my doctoral supervisor. Most local studies of the Reformation were of towns in southern Germany that were influenced by the theology of reformers such as Huldrych Zwingli or Martin Bucer, not of Lutheran regions. For its part, East German scholarship focused on the Peasants’ War and on the figure of Luther’s antagonist Thomas Müntzer as a revolutionary leader. The social history of Wittenberg, meanwhile, remained largely untouched. As a result the history of the Reformation was profoundly distorted. Biographies were largely written with no sense of the social and cultural world of Saxony or of Wittenberg, and thus tended to reinforce the view of Luther as a lone theological hero, who stands above time and space. Even so, there have been some subversive moments. By a fine irony, the best scholarly study of Wittenberg, unmatched since, testifies to the legacy of the early women’s movement: the 1927 work by the economic and social historian Edith Eschenhagen in which she analyzed Wittenberg’s tax records.
All these works had a strong influence on me when I began work on this book in 2006, and reinforced my view that a sense of place was essential to understanding Luther’s reformation. I spent as much time as I could in the archives at Wittenberg, which are housed in Friedrich the Wise’s castle. During the lunch hour I wandered around the town. I visited all the places where Luther had lived before going to Wittenberg, and I often read in the archives, not so much to find out about Luther as to get a sense of the local economy and power structure. I read accounts of Luther by his contemporaries, foes as well as friends—and I discovered that his antagonists often proved surprisingly shrewd about his psychology and motivations. But it was reading his letters that gave me the greatest pleasure and the richest encounter with the man. I read them not to corroborate or date Reformation events, but as literary sources that conveyed his emotions and illuminated his relationships with others. Luther’s letters were designed to make things happen. His mistakes, slips, self-justifications, and fondness for particular words reveal much about what moved him. In the early years of the Reformation, for example, he talked constantly of *invidia*, or envy, attributing it to his opponents—although it is hardly likely that they would have envied a penniless, powerless monk, while he, on the other hand, had every reason to be preoccupied with what he envied. I began to reflect that many of his theological concerns were closely related to the strong conflicts that shaped his psychology.

Luther’s letter-writing habits offered perhaps the most intriguing insights. Although he had had secretaries since his days as a monk, he wrote his letters himself, except when severe illness prevented him. His hand—small, neat, and well shaped—moves confidently across the page, and Luther almost always knew what size paper he would need, suggesting a remarkable ability to judge in advance how much he was going to write. Over the years his handwriting remained largely unchanged except for a tendency to become slightly smaller and more angular, the hand muscles evidently becoming more tense. Extraordinarily, in an age when letters were routinely passed from person to person, were forged or intercepted, and when every chancellery filed drafts, Luther kept no copies. This gave his correspon-
dents huge power, because they alone had records of what he had written, but Luther was relaxed about this, joking that he could always deny his own “hand,” a remark that reveals his remarkable confidence.

This breezy indifference to formalities is one of Luther’s most appealing characteristics. A brilliant, engaging personal correspondent, he had a sure sense of what would make his recipient laugh. He inquired about illness with genuine interest, but he also knew exactly how to cut to the chase, confronting a correspondent’s anguish with directness. More than anything else, the letters give us a sense of the charisma he must have radiated, and the sheer delight his correspondents must have experienced in being his friends. It was Luther’s vivid friendships and enmities that convinced me that he had to be understood through his relationships, and not as the lone hero of Reformation myth. Luther’s theology was formed in dialogue and debate with others—and it is no accident that the disputation, the form in which he proposed the Ninety-five Theses, remained an intellectual tool he cherished right up to his death.

This book also presents an unfamiliar picture of Luther’s theology. We are used to regarding him as the advocate of “salvation by grace alone,” the man who insisted on sola scriptura, the principle that the Bible is sole authority on matters of doctrine. But just as important to Luther himself was his insistence on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This is probably the issue many modern Protestants, suspicious of ritual and of the idea that the divine can be manifest in objects, find most alien. Yet the question dominated Luther’s later years and mobilized his deepest energies; it also split the Reformation. It was here that Luther was at his most original as a thinker, refusing to make the easy distinction between sign and signified, and insisting that Christ really was present in the Eucharist, which truly was the body and blood of Christ. Though he was an intellectual, Luther mistrusted “reason, the whore,” as he called it. His position on the Eucharist was at one with his striking ease with physicality, a trait that modern biographies find it hard to come to terms with. A deeply anti-ascetic thinker, Luther constantly undermined and subverted the distinction between flesh and spirit, and this aspect of his
thought is among his most compelling legacies. This is also why his theology has to be understood in relation to Luther the man.

Luther's Reformation unleashed passionate emotions: anger, fear, and hatred as well as joy and excitement. Luther himself was a deeply emotional individual, yet much of the history of the Reformation edits those emotions out, as unbecoming or irrelevant to the development of his theology. It is hard for historians and theologians to tackle what now seems so alien, his disturbing obsession with the Devil, virulent anti-Semitism, and crude polemic. Exploring his inner world, however, and the context into which his ideas and passions flooded, opens up a new vision of the Reformation.
MARTIN LUTHER
1. Mansfeld and Mining

"I am the son of a peasant," Luther averred, "my great-grandfather, grandfather and my father were all true peasants."¹ This was only half the truth. If he came from peasant stock, Luther grew up in a mining town, and his upbringing was to have a profound influence on him. Martin’s childhood was spent in Mansfeld, a small mining town in the territory of the same name, where wagonloads of charcoal would file along the muddy roads, and where the smell of the fires of the smelters hung on the air. He would remain loyal to Mansfeld throughout his life, referring to himself as “from Mansfeld,” enrolling at the University of Erfurt as “Martinus ludher ex mansfelt,” and corresponding with the counts of Mansfeld until he died.² In 1546, he set out, ill, on what was to be his final journey to Eisleben, trying to settle yet another dispute between the counts. He knew that the trip could cost him his life, and it did: He died still trying to put matters right in Mansfeld. Yet this deep connection has been almost completely obliterated in the image of Luther we have today.³ Most biographies have little to say about Luther’s childhood. Unlike his birthplace Eisleben, and unlike Wittenberg, where he spent most of his life, Mansfeld never became a site of Lutheran pilgrimage. But to make sense of Luther, one has to understand the world from which he came.

There had been mining in the Mansfeld area since about 1200 but in the mid-fifteenth century a new process of refining allowed silver and pure copper to be separated after the initial process of smelting.⁴ Highly capital-intensive, this technological innovation led to the involvement of the big financiers of Leipzig and Nuremberg, and it
brought an economic boom to the area. Mansfeld was soon among the biggest European producers of silver and it produced a quarter of the continent's copper. Copper was used in combination with tin or zinc, as bronze or brass, in the hundreds of household items produced in towns like Nuremberg, and it played a large part in the lifestyle revolution in this period, as people began to acquire not only glass and crockery but also metal dishes, pans, and other implements for use at home. Luther's father, Hans Luder, probably through connections of his mother's family, heard of the new mining leases that were up for sale in the 1480s, and moved first to Eisleben, where Luther was born in 1483, and then to Mansfeld.

![Image of Eisleben](image)

1. Eisleben, where Luther was born.

Luther himself later described his father as "a metal worker, a miner"; but the story told by his early biographers of Hans Luder's rise from rags to riches is not true. Although his family were clearly not educated people, Hans was certainly never one of those hooded, squat men who toiled lying down in the low mine tunnels with their pickaxes. The Luder family had been peasants, yet even though he was the eldest son, Hans did not inherit: According to local custom at Möhra, where his parents lived, it was the youngest son who took over the farm. The value of the property was probably equally di-
vided between the children, and this may have given the oldest son some capital. Recent research also suggests that the Luder family may have owned a rudimentary copper-smelting works near Möhra, where Hans might have gained some experience. He must have had serious prospects, however, for it is otherwise hard to explain why the Lindemanns, an established urban family in Eisenach—whose members included Anthonius Lindemann, the highest-ranking official in the county of Mansfeld and himself a smelter-master—should in 1479 have betrothed their daughter to a young man without a trade and with no promise of an inheritance. It turned out to be a wise decision. Within a short period of time Luder was not only running mines, but by 1491 at the latest had become one of the Vierer, an adjunct to the town council representing the four quarters of Mansfeld, and would eventually become a mining inspector (Schauherr), which made him one of the five most senior mining officials in the area. By the early sixteenth century, he was operating seven smelters in joint ventures with others, placing him among the bigger operators in Mansfeld.

In 1500 the town had a population of around 2,000–3,000 people, with five “hospitals” to care for the poor and houses for the sick; more unusually, it also boasted a Latin school for boys. Mansfeld nestled in a valley, with four gates and two portals allowing entry. Its “quarters” had mushroomed out from a much smaller initial settlement. One of its two main streets wound steeply up the hill to the church on the main square, and it was on this street that the smelter-masters and the officials of the counts had their houses. The church, dedicated to St. George, the patron saint of Mansfeld, had been erected in the thirteenth century but burned down when Luther was in his early teens (thanks to an absentminded organist who forgot to put out the fire that heated the bellows). It was rebuilt between 1497 and 1502, with a choir finally finished in 1518–20. The sword-wielding knight St. George was locally believed to have been a count of Mansfeld, who had fought the dragon on the nearby Lindberg hill. The counts certainly made capital out of this fictional connection, and the saint was depicted on their coins and fountains and above doors; there were even St. George weathercocks.
Hans Luder’s house was located opposite the Golden Ring tavern, one of two hosteries where travelers might stop. The town lay on the trade route from Hamburg to Nuremberg via Erfurt, but there were few reasons why travelers would have broken their journey in Mansfeld, unless they were going to visit the counts or were involved in mining. Luder’s house still stands, and it is now believed to have been twice as big as previously thought. (We do not know for certain when Hans Luder acquired the house; he certainly owned it in 1507.) There is a wide entrance through which a horse and cart could pass, and a big barn and stables for horses. From the house the effects of mining would have been visible everywhere: Slag heaps pockmarked the landscape and the large pond below the town was polluted with the slag water from the two smelters outside the town walls. Farther up the street, toward the square in front of the Church of St. George, stood the large house of Luther’s best friend, Hans Reinicke, whose father was also a mine owner and one of the most prosperous men in Mansfeld. Next door, between Luther’s house and the school, lived another friend, Nickel Öhmler, who would later become related by marriage.

Above the town loomed the castles of the Mansfeld counts. It is hard to imagine a setup more likely to impress on a young lad like Luther the power of the town’s rulers. There was no primogeniture among the counts. Instead, all sons inherited, and when Luther was a boy there were three lines of Mansfeld counts; in 1501, when a formal pact was made dividing the territory, the ruling collective consisted of no fewer than five counts. Not surprisingly, they did not always get along, and one of the points of tension between them was the castle. In Luther’s childhood, two castles stood on the site along with two other dwellings, two bakeries, two breweries, stables, and a dividing wall with a shared path. It must have been an impressive set of structures, for in 1474 the counts had been able to host the king of Denmark and 150 of his knights for three nights. In 1501, when Count Albrecht decided to build a third castle on the site, he met with opposition from the other counts. The dispute was eventually settled, and Albrecht was allowed to realize his ambitions. With the wealth from the mines, three pocket-handkerchief-sized Renaissance
castles—one painted red, one yellow, and one blue, with shared access to the chapel—were now rebuilt and restructured to form one of the best-fortified castle complexes in Germany. It was popularly believed that when one of the counts commissioned an altarpiece for the chapel depicting the Crucifixion, he had the thief on Christ’s right painted as his most hated co-ruler. True or not, the thief has the individualized features of a portrait and is unusually not naked but sports the outfit of an executioner, with garish parti-colored hose. Since executioners were shunned as dishonorable, this would have been a delicious insult.¹⁹

2. The altarpiece at Mansfeld Castle.

The Luder family lived well.²⁰ They particularly relished the tender meat of suckling pigs, a comparatively expensive food at a time when beef imported from central Europe was starting to become more common. They also ate songbirds that they trapped. At least one member of the family was a passionate bird-catcher, because several of the goose-bone whistles used to attract birds have survived in the midden outside the house. There was a well-stocked kitchen, amply
furnished with simple green and yellow plates and crockery; there were drinking glasses, too, still a luxury in this period. This was certainly a family who liked their food, enjoyed the pleasures of life, and did not have to watch the pennies.

In most sixteenth-century urban households, the master’s wife shared in the business of the workshop, bustling over the apprentices and journeymen, sometimes even doing the bookkeeping. But among the mine-owning class the realms of husband and wife were sharply distinct. The miners lived in their own cottages with their families and the smelter-master’s wife was not responsible for their food or upkeep. Hans Luder himself went out to work each day beyond the town walls, where he was immersed in that strange world of smoke, shafts, and tunnels, while Luther’s mother stayed at home with the servants and children. This was a separation of spheres much more like that of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, and very different from what was then the norm in early-modern German towns and farmsteads where women raised the poultry, grew the herbs, undertook

3., 4., and 5. In the illustrations to Georg Agricola’s treatise on mining, De re metallica (1556), two buxom women pound the ore on the long tables, a method that would still be in use in the nineteenth century. Two other women sieve charcoal, while in the background of a view of the gigantic bellows, a short-skirted maid can be glimpsed going about her work.
the dairy work, and trekked to market. Here women had to be able to take over the farm or business should they become widows. The strict demarcation between the sexes in the Luder household was therefore rather unusual, and it may help explain why Luther’s later ideas about gender roles exaggerate the differences between the sexes: “Men have broad shoulders and narrow hips, and accordingly they possess intelligence. Women have narrow shoulders and broad hips. Women ought to stay at home; the way they were created indicates this, for they have broad hips and a wide fundament to sit upon.”

Women were not entirely absent from mining lower down the social scale. In account books from the early sixteenth century, the miners’ wives are listed as well as their menfolk with the amounts they earned per week, testimony to their importance in the industry. Alongside the men, they turned the winding handles to haul weights in and out of the shafts, and with their children, they helped break up the ore according to quality. They did the backbreaking work of sieving the charcoal, to make the fine powder for the lime needed to line the smelters; they washed the miners’ clothes, heavy with dust; and they used the slag the men brought home as heating.

Luther’s father was one of the Hüttenmeister, the smelter-masters who oversaw the highly skilled operation of the copper-smelting process and who effectively ran the mines. Each shaft was allocated to a smelter or “fire,” and the Hütten (huts) were situated near streams, because water power drove the bellows that fanned the flames of the smelters. One hut might have several ovens, and in 1508 there were some ninety-five “fires” in Mansfeld, which were run by about forty smelter-masters. These contracted with gang masters who provided the miners, and who worked alongside them underground. Labor relations were therefore mediated, and when the miners rose up in protest against their conditions, as they did in 1507, they put their complaints to the counts in writing. The counts, for their part, knew not to try the patience of the miners too far: While they might have executed rebellious peasants, on this occasion they imposed whopping fines of a hundred guilders on the dozen or so ringleaders, but allowed them to pay by installment. The authorities had to exert
their power, but the highly skilled labor force was too precious to waste. Proud men who were aware of their skills, the miners did not give up and in 1511 they formed a brotherhood to advance their interests.\textsuperscript{27}

Court books from the period give some rare insight into what life was like in the world of mining. There were constant thefts of wood, ladders, and equipment from the shafts, and violence was never far away.\textsuperscript{28} A man killed a prostitute in a brothel in nearby Hettstedt and was executed for it. Another slew a man and threw the body down a mine shaft—he too paid with his life—while a third attacked his own father, damaging his fist so seriously that he was unable to work.\textsuperscript{29} Criminal law at the time mixed Roman law with older traditions that placed the emphasis on mediation. Thus murder could still be settled by paying the victim’s family compensation, though even so, between 1507 and 1509, at least three criminals were executed for murder.\textsuperscript{30}

There were constant quarrels between different groups of miners. The \textit{Haspeler}, who wound the winches, hated the \textit{Sinker}, who sank the shafts. The Sinker were mostly from Silesia and, scorned marriage, lived with girlfriends in houses near the mines where they also kept chickens and other livestock.\textsuperscript{31} Mining was dangerous work. The tunnels that led off from the shafts were narrow, and miners had to work lying down on their bellies. There was little light. If the weather turned bad, the lamps would suddenly go out as sulfur gas accumulated in the mine shaft, poisoning any miners still below. It was believed that the gas was a product of the evil airs drawn from the brimstone and metals, rising in the tunnels and chilling men to death.\textsuperscript{32}

Mining was thirsty work, and as water was not drinkable, brewing was the town’s other major industry. Alcohol fueled quarrels, and since just about all men carried knives, fights tended to become bloody. Most brawls took place in taverns or drinking shops.\textsuperscript{33} Luther’s own uncle, “Little Hans,” a wastrel who went from one pub brawl to another, would meet his death in a fracas at a drinking house in 1536.\textsuperscript{34} People used whatever was to hand, grabbing the tavern lamps to bash an opponent, or hoisting the beer jugs to buffet an opponent about the head. Representing comradeship, these jugs also
had symbolic significance: One man would insult another as not worthy to share a jug with a respectable man. Drinking was surrounded with bonding rituals and there were competitive drinking games where a man had to stand his ground. One favorite required the use of the “pass glass,” ridged with bands separated by different widths, from which the drinker had to down his tipple exactly to the next ridge; the Luder family owned at least one of these.

In such a pugilistic culture, insults were routine. One man might taunt another: “If you were born of a pious [that is, chaste] woman, come out and fight, but if you were born of a rogue, stay indoors.” There was little chivalry in the taverns. A man would tell a woman to go hang out with the priests and monks in Hettstedt “as she had doubtless done before.” “There are no more than two or three pious women in the whole of Mansfeld,” another man announced angrily. He stayed pointedly silent when his companion asked him whether he included his wife in that number. Work disputes could rapidly descend into arguments about an individual’s sexual, moral, and social behavior because honor, the central social category, was both sexual and economic.

During Luther’s childhood, Hans Luder would have been a force to be reckoned with. He was a physically powerful man, and once, when a pub fight broke out in his presence, he poured beer over the two combatants to separate them, clouting both on the head for good measure with a jug until the blood ran. He was also not a man to be crossed lightly. We find him complaining about the high charges of the winch-winders, and about another mine operator who, he claimed, was stealing his ore (the accused countered that Luder was taking his charcoal). The court books are littered with disputes between the mine operators—small wonder, with 194 shafts at the industry’s peak in the early sixteenth century in the Mansfeld and Eisleben areas, where it could be hard to know where one mine’s territory began and another ended. Time and again, the mine inspector would be called to check the location of boundary stones. Tunnels honeycombed the hills. The longest was a remarkable eight miles long, and it was rumored that a man could reach Eisleben from the castle in Mansfeld through the tunnels.
It was also a world of dizzyingly complex financial arrangements. Much of the mining structures had to be maintained collectively, and the records afford a glimpse of the maze of loans, counter-loans, and securities as money circulated among the small group of mine operators, or was advanced by the capitalists of Nuremberg, and as mines were relinquished and redistributed.\textsuperscript{59} Hans Luder would have been caught between several competing forces: the counts, who leased the mines and constantly sought to extract more money by altering the legal terms; the other mine managers, who were only too quick to seize an advantage; the miners, whose labor actually produced the wealth from the ground, and who were beginning to organize collectively; and the capitalists in faraway Nuremberg and Leipzig, who drove hard bargains and to whom it was only too easy to become irrevocably indebted.

These economic relations were new, and they were complicated. The large-scale mining leases given to new mine owners and the silver refining introduced in the fifteenth century brought in the capitalists from outside. These developments created deeply uncertain relationships, legally, economically, and socially. The new leases issued by the counts were no longer permanent but temporary, and created a two-tier legal arrangement among the small elite of mine owners. There was no guarantee of success, however. Some entrepreneurs earned vast amounts of money—families like the Heidelbergs and the Drachstedts made fabled fortunes—while others were sinking deeper and deeper into debt.

Mansfeld mine owners frequently had to join forces in order to secure the necessary capital and machinery. But instead of forming exclusive and permanent joint ventures, they relied on contracts, just as merchants did, agreeing to work together for a stated period of time.\textsuperscript{40} Hans Luder worked his way up to a substantial position in Mansfeld, taking on seven “fires” and probably two hundred workers in the second decade of the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{41} He also knew that he needed someone who understood legal contracts and who could protect his interests from the merchant capitalists and the counts, and this probably played its part in his decision that his son should study law. Luder’s partnership with Dr. Drachstedt, who had a doctorate in
law and would become the richest mine owner in the district in the second half of the 1520s, may also have inspired Hans’s plans for his son.42

Where contracts did not protect, blood might. Like all the members of this tiny mining elite of twenty to thirty families, Hans Luder used marriage alliances to cement his position. With three or four sons—we do not know for sure—and four daughters, Hans Luder could dream of a dynasty, but two of his sons would die of plague in 1506 or 1507, and a daughter in 1520.43 Three daughters married into the local elite. Dorothea married one of the Mackenrodt clan, who had been in the area for at least a century and were among the privileged group of those who enjoyed secure titles. Margarethe, named after her mother, married Heinz Kaufmann, who between 1508 and 1512 ran only one “fire,” but would later go into partnership with his father-in-law, as would Martin’s younger brother Jacob (whose name his family pronounced “Jacuff”). The third sister married Claus Polner, who, like Luder, belonged to the group of mine owners without secure leases.44

Yet all Hans Luder’s careful calculations and long-term strategies would eventually come to nought. The Mansfeld mines were collectively administered by the five counts, with the exercise of jurisdiction alternating among them. It seems to have been a fair system, but the mining income also had to produce enough funds to support the Renaissance palaces looming over the town. It was long after Luther had left home, in the 1520s, that this balance became increasingly difficult to maintain. While the counts continued to squeeze money out of the leaseholders, income from the mines began to decline—the seams were deeper and therefore harder to reach, water had to be pumped out, and they required more machinery. The numbers of smelter-masters shrank and the silver-refining companies (Saigergesellschaften) that had been financing the mine operators now began to gain possession of the mines as the smelter-masters became indebted to them.45 A proud, independent man, by the 1520s Hans Luder himself was unable to pay off his debts and was forced to work for the hated capitalists, in his case the Saigerhandelsgesellschaft at Schwarza, on a salary of fifty guilders a year with, humiliatingly, a supervisor at
his side. When he died in 1530 there were no mines for his son in Mansfeld to inherit, only the family property—worth a not insubstantial sum—to be shared equally among the children. While in 1508 there had been forty-two smelter-masters in Mansfeld, by 1536 their number had halved. In the 1560s, by which time the counts were running the Mansfeld mines themselves, the entire mining enterprise went bankrupt. By the end of the century, the seams were exhausted and German silver production had given way to competition from the silver of the New World.

Hans Luder and his contemporaries tried to make sense of economic relationships that no one could understand or control, and which were eventually to destroy them. They had no economic theory and little understanding of how wealth was created: No one knew why the capitalists in Nuremberg and Leipzig profited while the mine owners suddenly became impoverished. Economic thought was based on the assumption that wealth was limited. If one person had wealth, another could not get it. Metals, it was believed, resulted from the mixing of quicksilver and brimstone and were shaped by the influences of the planets. Mining was a matter of luck. There were diviners, and there were printed advice books, but no one knew where the rich seams might lie. Small wonder that the figure of Fate should have been so ubiquitous in the Mansfelders’ lives.

There was a rich mining folklore that left its mark on Luther. With water essential to the process of smelting, he grew up with the belief in “nixes,” or water sprites, mischievous creatures who played tricks on humans. The fossils found in the mines were said to be drawings made by the spirits of the earth and of the air, and strange uncanny lights were believed to point to the rich seams. The adult Luther thought the lights were Satan’s work. Satan was the arch deceiver and, Luther wrote, “in the mines the Devil vexes and deceives people, puts spirits before their eyes so that they believe they see a huge pile of ore and silver, where there is nothing.” And although Luther ostensibly rejected much superstition about mining, he held on to ideas about luck. Some people, he admitted, were lucky to find the rich ores. “I have no luck in mining,” Luther wrote, “because the Devil won’t permit me this gift of God’s.” As so often,
Luther provided a theological explanation that overlay older beliefs about fortune—and, only half in jest, attributed power to the Devil instead.

The mine owners’ bitter experiences shaped Luther’s economic thought. His periodic outbursts later in life against the “little tricks” of the “thieves,” “robbers,” and “interest squires” expressed a populist hatred of major capitalists like the Fuggers, who engaged in the sinful practices of usury, and who tried to gain a monopoly on sources of wealth such as trading minerals. Luther reached for the moral language of sin to explain economic behavior, castigating their avarice, one of the seven deadly sins, but this ethical approach left him unable to deal with the mechanisms of the new capitalism. He rejected many commercial practices as unchristian and maintained all his life that usury was a sin, although he was willing to countenance a basic rate of return on lending. Offered shares in the mines of the Saxon dukes later in life that would have returned him a much-needed
three hundred guilders a year, Luther refused, declaring “I am the Pope’s louse, I torment him, and he keeps me, and I live off his goods.” Luther did not want to be a capitalist. For him, shares were Spielgeld, toy money.\textsuperscript{52}

It is hardly surprising that when Johannes Tetzel, the preacher who would eventually spark Luther’s Ninety-five Theses, began to sell indulgences in 1508, he headed straight for the new mining region of St. Annaberg, named after the miner’s saint, the mother of the Virgin Mary: Miners needed all the protection they could muster. As Myconius, the town’s Lutheran preacher, would put it later, they hoped that “if they just put in the money and bought grace and indulgences, all the mountains around St. Annaberg would become the purest silver; and as soon as the coins clinked in the bowl, the soul for whom they had put it in would fly straight to heaven with their dying breath.”\textsuperscript{53}

It may have been that omnipresence of uncertainty, danger, and risk in the mining world that settled in Luther’s soul and gave him a deep conviction of the complete omnipotence of God: a sense that human beings are utterly exposed in their dealings with Him, and that there are no mediators or strategies that could protect them. Magic would not work, insurance did not exist, law offered only flimsy protection. The miner could call on the saints, especially St. Anna. But in the end, he faced God alone.

AROUND 1527 Lucas Cranach the Elder painted portraits of Luther’s parents, when they visited their son in Wittenberg. The painting of Hans shows a man with a powerful physical presence, and chunky features. A man of action, he looks almost uncomfortable sitting still, his hands awkwardly folded. He is dressed in black, the color favored by men of substance, and wears the obligatory fur collar. The resemblance to Martin is unmistakable. He has the same deep-set eyes and the heavy jowls that Luther inherited. His mother Margarethe’s white coiffé and shirt complement the dark colors of her husband’s portrait. With her simple, conventional attire, and wearing no jewelry, she is presented as a model wife, although her
chin juts forward, suggesting a less conventional character. There is also a surviving sketch of Hans Luder in pencil and watercolor by Cranach, probably a study for the portrait. Focused only on the face, it is more revealing: Hans’s eyes are wrinkled against the light and his face is weathered, as befits a man used to working out of doors. The mouth is firm, the nose emphatic. This is a man used to speaking his mind, but the clouded gaze also suggests someone whose power is now spent, a patriarch grown old. When the portraits were produced, the glory days of mining were already over.

It is difficult to know what kind of a father Hans Luder made. Conventionally pious, he practiced the devotion common to his generation. A member of the brotherhoods of St. Anna and of St. George, he also helped found the local Marian brotherhood, and a fragment of a horn from Aachen, found in the house, shows that someone in the family may have undertaken this famous seven-yearly pilgrimage: The horns were blown when the relics were displayed.54 But it is doubtful that Luther’s intense spirituality came from his father: Hans Luder was a man used to relying on his own ability to get things done, who had chosen not to work for others, but to assume responsibility himself. We know that Luther was surprised to find out about his extensive kinsfolk on his father’s side when he visited them in Möhra after the Diet of Worms in 1521, so Hans had evidently not kept in touch with his wider family once he had struck out on his own.55 He had acquired his skills and talents himself, and not through inheritance. Yet even if his family background gave him some basic knowledge of mining, this could not have taught him how to run a substantial mining enterprise, manage large amounts of capital, or discipline a difficult workforce. This irascible, competitive man, who knew how to make his way in a rough man’s world, would have made an exacting father. It seems that he was unable to accept that his son wanted to pursue a path in life different from his own. The bitterness of the conflict between father and son that ensued when Martin entered the monastery suggests how closely Hans had identified with him, and how deeply he was hurt by Martin’s rejection of the life he had planned for him.

Luther, who inherited his father’s determination to succeed, might
seem like a classic eldest son, although he may have had an older brother who died.\textsuperscript{56} The Luder household was full of children. Luther's younger brother Jacob seems to have been a close companion, and their mother is reported as saying, "There was always such mutual good feeling between the two brothers so that neither of them preferred any companion to the other brother, nor took any delight in any food or any game without the other."\textsuperscript{57} Perhaps, like many eldest children, Martin felt the arrival of the new siblings keenly, envying how they monopolized his mother's attention—infants were normally suckled for a couple of years. In 1532, watching his own pregnant wife, Katharina von Bora, feed their young son Martin, Luther remarked, "It is hard to feed two guests, one in the house, the other at the door."\textsuperscript{58} When their fifth child, Paul, was born in 1533, Luther held him in his arms and mused "how much Adam must have loved his firstborn son Cain, and yet he became his brother's killer." At one level, this was a conventional recognition that fathers love their children no matter what they do, but the off-kilter remark may also reveal that he knew how envious a displaced firstborn can feel.\textsuperscript{59}
Whether or not Luther ever had an older brother, it was his education in which his father chose to invest, and this special treatment would have made him proud and confident of his ability to succeed like his father.

But it may also have made him feel guilty toward his siblings, and worried about their envy. Luther knew the price of his university education: Two years of smelting had to pay for his studies at Erfurt, something his father doubtless made sure he never forgot. He also knew that this was money not spent on his brothers and sisters. Seven or possibly eight children, five of whom survived into adulthood, had to be trained or found dowries—all to be funded from Hans Luder’s mining operations. The structure of the family economy, where the children were meant to make their way from the income of the Mansfeld ores, was likely to have fostered a sense of common purpose, and the family seems to have remained close-knit throughout Luther’s life. When his parents died there was some bad feeling over the inheritance, which was to be equally divided, an irritation that perhaps revived conflicts from the past. Luther, as the eldest, acted as peacemaker and drew up the contract of division, insisting that now all “dislike and unwillingness” be set aside. But Martin’s privileged position may have left occasional envy and bitterness as well. Luther’s almost allergic reaction whenever he thought others envied him would become a settled feature of his character.

Whereas most of Luther’s generation of scholars came from the craft towns, and many were familiar with the large imperial towns and their elegant fashions and civic pride, Luther’s character was forged in a very different and much rougher world. His upbringing in Mansfeld would have given him a toughness and a readiness to put himself physically on the line, qualities that would be tested to the limit in the years ahead. From his father and the other mine owners he would have learned the importance of creating networks, a skill that would make the Reformation possible. He would have learned how to be a leader—and to expect not deference but assaults, arguments, and brickbats. Mansfeld nurtured in him a sense of politics that was grounded in authority and class division, and rested on a clear distinction between the counts who ruled from the hill and the “black
miners, as Luther termed them, who worked below. Socially, it taught him the importance of friendship and kin. Through marriage he would become related to most of his Mansfeld friends and he would replicate the same patterns years later, as Lutheran clergy intermarried, creating a new professional caste, bound by ties of kinship. Theologically, his childhood may have inclined him toward a powerful sense of the unbridgeable distance between God and man, and of the unpredictability of God's providence. Nothing stood between the miner and disaster; and for every miner who struck a lucky seam there were more who lost everything. But those who did not trust Lady Luck, or grasped at superstition, might be left with a shrewd realism about the operations of the world, and a cynical distrust of the stars.