

LUTHER'S ESCHATOLOGICAL APPRAISAL OF THE TURKISH THREAT IN *EINE HEERPREDIGT WIDER DEN TÜRKEN*

JOHN T. BALDWIN
Andrews University

Introduction

Although Martin Luther is deservedly well-known for his soteriological rediscoveries, Winfried Vogel cogently argues that his eschatological thinking warrants closer consideration than it is normally accorded because Luther's eschatological concerns permeate his theology.¹ The present study joins Vogel's efforts and those of other scholars currently mining this relationship.²

¹Winfried Vogel, "The Eschatological Theology of Martin Luther, Part I: Luther's Basic Concepts," *AUSS* 24 (Autumn 1986): 249-264; *ibid.*, "The Eschatological Theology of Martin Luther, Part II: Luther's Exposition of Daniel and Revelation," *AUSS* 25 (Summer 1987): 183-199. See Part I:249 for Vogel's thesis that Luther's theology was influenced by his eschatological concerns.

²For a sampling of these works (beginning with recent studies) see Jane Elizabeth Strohl, "Luther's Eschatology: The Last Times and the Last Things" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1991); Thomas A. Dughi, "The Breath of Christ's Mouth: Apocalypse and Prophecy in Early Reformation Ideology" (Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1990); Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 64-74, 297; Robin Bruce Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988); Johann Heinz, "The 'Summer That Will Never End': Luther's Longing for the 'Dear Last Day' in His Sermon on Luke 21 (1531)," *AUSS* 23 (Summer 1985): 181-186; Eric W. Gritsch, "The Cultural Context of Luther's Interpretation," *Interpretation* 37 (July 1983): 266-276; Pierre Buhler, *Kreuz und Eschatologie: eine Auseinandersetzung mit der politischen Theologie, im Anschluss an Luthers theologia crucis* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1981); George W. Forell, "Justification and Eschatology in Luther's Thought," *Church History* 38 (June 1969): 164-174; John Richard Loeschen, "Eschatological Themes in Luther's Theology" (Thesis, Graduate Theological Union and the Pacific School of Religion, 1968); Ulrich Asendorf, *Eschatologie bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1967).

Studies focusing largely upon Luther's views concerning the eschatological significance of the Turks include, among others, John Wolfgang Bohnstedt, *The Infidel Scourge of God: The Turkish Menace as Seen by German Pamphleteers of the Reformation Era* (Philadelphia: American

This essay complements Vogel's research in two ways. Both studies present introductory concepts relevant to an interpretation of Luther's eschatology. Where Vogel presents background material centering on seven "possible grounds for Luther's eschatological outlook,"³ this study begins by discussing three interrelated components comprising Luther's theological and philosophical interpretation of history. Vogel's main investigation centers on Luther's eschatology as presented in the reformer's commentaries on the books of Daniel (1529) and Revelation (1529/30) while this piece focuses principally upon Luther's eschatological interpretation and evaluation of the serious Turkish military threat as stated largely in his untranslated hortatory treatise, *Eine Heerpredigt wider den Türken* (Army Sermon Against the Turks), (1529).⁴

The study proceeds in three steps. First, the piece highlights regulative principles shaping Luther's theological understanding of history, forming a setting within which to place his eschatological interpretation of the Turkish threat. Second, the paper briefly treats the historical context of the Turkish problem and Luther's developing theological attitude toward the Turks (1517-1529). Third, the study analyzes important details of Luther's eschatological interpretation of the Turks in the *Heerpredigt*, as found principally in the reformer's discussion of Daniel 7, and briefly reflects upon some theological consequences of Luther's eschatological interpretation.

Three Central Components of Luther's Theological Interpretation of History

In this short essay it is clearly not possible to deal fully with all components of Luther's theological interpretation of history. However, as a general introduction to his eschatological interpretation of the

Philosophical Society, 1968); Harvey Buchanan, "Luther and the Turks 1519-1529," *ARG* 47 (1956): 145-160; Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531-46* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Stephen A. Fischer-Galati, *Ottoman Imperialism and German Protestantism, 1521-1555* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); George W. Forell, "Luther and the War Against the Turks," *Church History* 14 (December 1945): 256-271; John Headly, "The Antichrist and the Last Times," in *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 224-265; Helmut Lamparter, *Luthers Stellung zum Türkenkrieg* (Munich: Albert Lemp, 1940).

³Vogel, Part I: 250. See pp. 251-264 for Vogel's seven basic components of Luther's eschatology: the existential component in Luther's eschatology, allegorical application of apocalyptic language and symbols, setting the time for Christ's return, end-time signs, the "beloved last day," the condition of the dead, and the Antichrist.

⁴The sermon is located in volume 30/2 of the Weimar Ausgabe edition of Luther's works (WA). The sermon itself will be cited as *Heerpredigt*. Because the 32-page *Heerpredigt* remains unpublished in English, the translations presented in this essay are those by the author.

Turkish phenomenon, it is helpful to note briefly the following three interrelated components of Luther's understanding of history, most of which represent his thinking at the time of the publication of the *Heerpredigt* in 1529: the God twice hidden in history, foreordination and providence, and God's universal sovereignty over the nations and history as affected by the principles of the two-kingdoms doctrine and the *Wunderleute Gottes* (God's miracle people).

God Twice Hidden in History

The doctrine of the hidden and revealed God is not only a major component, but also a regulative principle in Luther's understanding of history and nature.⁵ In *The Bondage of the Will* (1525) Luther argues that in this life the Christian reads history with two sets of eyes by using the first two of the following three lights: "the light of nature, the light of grace and the light of glory."⁶ On the one hand a person views history with the physical eyes, i.e., in the light of nature, but this does not reveal an active God. This is the first dimension of the hiddenness of God in this life. On the other hand, the believer must read the deeper invisible meaning of history with the eyes of faith in the light of grace in order to gain some understanding of God's actions in history: "By the light of nature, it is inexplicable that it should be just for the good to be afflicted and the bad to prosper; but the light of grace explains it."⁷

In addition, in *Lectures on Galatians* (1535) Luther laments that the first dimension of the hiddenness of God is acutely apparent in the presence and activity of God in nature:

Now the whole creation is a face or mask of God. But here we need the wisdom that distinguishes God from His masks. The world does not have this wisdom. Therefore, it cannot distinguish God from His mask. . . . When a greedy man, who worships his belly, hears that "man does not live by bread alone, but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4) he eats the bread, but fails to see God in the bread; for he sees, admires, and adores only the masks.⁸

Thus, God's hidden, but active, presence is ubiquitous in nature, occasioning no end of wonder in Luther who marvels at the incredible

⁵For an insightful study of Luther's view of God hidden and revealed, see Heinrich Bornkamm, "The Hidden and the Revealed God," in *Luther's World of Thought*, trans. Martin H. Bertram (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1958), 55-74.

⁶Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (London: James Clarke, 1957), 317. Hereinafter this work will be cited as *Bondage of the Will*.

⁷Ibid.

⁸LW 26:95.

blindness of the popular mind which refuses to perceive the miracle of God in physical reality. In commenting on Psalm 111:2 (1530—one year after the publication of the *Heerpredigt*) Luther discloses in the following delightful manner his own sense of awe concerning God's works:

They [the masses] are used to them [the miracles of God in nature] and saturated with them like an old house with smoke. They use them and root around in them like a hog in a bag of feed. They say: "Oh, is that such a great thing that the sun shines, or fire warms, or water gives fish, or the earth yields grain, or a cow calves, or a woman bears children, or a hen lays eggs? That happens every day!" My dear Mr. Simpleton, is it a small thing just because it happens every day? . . . If a magician could make an eye that would live or that would be able to see one cubit, great God, he would be a lord on earth! . . .

But it is a discouraging thing that men are so damnably ungrateful and blind. God showers upon them such great and rich miracles and they do not consider even one of them or thank Him for it. But if some clown shows up who can walk a tight rope or who has monkeys to display, him they admire, praise and exalt.⁹

This indicates that both in the natural world and in history God is hidden to the light of nature in this first dimension. One must remember that only in the light of grace can one pierce the mystifying events to an initial form of explanation of God's activities whose presence the events have masked.

Yet even in His revealedness in grace some of God's actions remain obscured in a depth of hiddenness which not even the light of grace can illumine, as Luther explains in *The Bondage of the Will*: "By the light of grace, it is inexplicable how God can damn him who by his own strength can do nothing but sin and become guilty."¹⁰ Moreover, in the same work Luther instructs any person asking God for illumination on this point that "it is not lawful to ask; and though you should ask much, you would never find out; as Paul says in Rom. 11: 'Who art thou that repliest against God?' (Rom. 9:20)."¹¹ This is the second dimension of God's hiddenness with respect to human understanding, in this life, of divine decisions and actions toward individuals in history.

However, Luther suggests that in the third light, the light of glory, the *prima facie* ontological contradiction revealed by the light of grace between the hidden and revealed God (e.g., that "He [God] does not will the death of a sinner—that is, in His Word; but He wills it by His

⁹LW 13:366-367.

¹⁰*Bondage of the Will*, 317.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 171.

inscrutable will,"¹²), will be shown to have been a noetic, not an ontic difficulty.¹³ For example, according to Luther the light of glory will reveal the following truth about God's actions in earthly history: "The light of glory . . . will one day reveal God . . . whose justice is incomprehensible, as a God Whose justice is most righteous and evident."¹⁴ These words imply that the believer needs two lights in this life and ultimately one celestial light to understand fully God's actions in history, thus suggesting that some of God's actions are twice hidden in history in this present life.

Luther's general point that God's actions are present yet hidden in history leads us to a second component in Luther's theology of history, namely to the concepts of foreordination and providence.

Foreordination and Providence

The complex notions of foreordination and providence are distinct but related doctrines which together form a kind of logical unit within Luther's theological understanding of history. Luther understands foreordination to refer to God's choice of this or that person to be saved and also to God's choice of this or that event, act, and so on. On the other hand, providence comprehends the effectual divine working out in history of that which has been foreordained. The following quotations characterize the nature of these related doctrines: "God foreknows and wills all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably;"¹⁵ "For not even the leaf of a tree falls to the ground without the will of the Father;"¹⁶ "All things take place according to God's election;"¹⁷ and, "God is incessantly active in all His creatures, allowing none of them to keep holiday."¹⁸ These lines illustrate Luther's view of God's ultimate orchestration of historical events and His constant activity in historical passage.

The need for the related doctrines of foreordination and providence in Luther's scheme of history including, of course, his convictions regarding eschatology, arises largely from his rejection of

¹²Ibid., 170.

¹³The author owes the mode of speaking about the tension in the divine nature in terms of noetic and ontic categories in Luther's theology to a study by Brian Gerrish entitled, "To the Unknown God," *JR* 53 (July 1973): 268.

¹⁴*Bondage of the Will*, 317.

¹⁵Ibid., 83-84.

¹⁶LW 25:373. Luther is commenting on Romans 8:28.

¹⁷LW 25:391. In this context Luther is commenting on Romans 9:17.

¹⁸Quoted in Ernest F. Winter, *Erasmus-Luther Discourse on Free Will* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1961), 130.

natural moral syneresis. If sinful man is to participate in a divinely ordained history, God's foreordination and providence must be active because human beings are inherently turned away from God toward self, thus precluding their participation in divinely ordained historical objectives. For example, in *Lectures on Romans* Luther argues that the will of the natural individual without grace does not even weakly tend toward righteousness or God—it "lies dead"¹⁹ and "is a nausea toward the good."²⁰ These statements provide the basis for Luther's powerful literary figure that the will is fatally "curved in upon itself"—*in curatus in se*.²¹ Furthermore, Luther quotes John 6:44 in order to show the otiosity even of the external word of the gospel alone to move the will "unless the Father Himself speaks within, and teaches, and draws."²² How does Luther apply these notions to God's activity concerning the believing and nonbelieving individual in history?

The application of these concepts to the cases of the elect seems to place the ultimate responsibility with God in the following sense:

But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will [*arbitrio*, as contrasted with *voluntas*], and put it under the control of His, . . . I have the comfortable certainty that . . . no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him.²³

These lines seem to suggest that Luther firmly believed that he was numbered among the elect on the individual level because of God's decision and control. But how is the foreordaining will of God applied in terms of divine intervention in history (providence) in the cases of the lost, for instance, in the famous case of Pharaoh? What is the *modus operandi* by which God supervenes in the secular mind to accomplish His will in history? We turn to Luther's responses to these questions in the discussion below.

While refuting a counterargument that God forces Pharaoh to sin, Luther articulates the method by which divinity guides the nonbeliever. Thus God did not harden the will of Pharaoh in a directly causal sense, but rather in an indirect, external sense by irritating Pharaoh's evil will from without, for example by the Word of God spoken by Moses to Pharaoh.²⁴ Because God finds an evil will in Pharaoh, He continues by

¹⁹LW 25:184.

²⁰LW 25:299.

²¹LW 25:291.

²²*Bondage of the Will*, 311.

²³*Ibid.*, 314.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 207.

"omnipotent action to move within him the evil will."²⁵ These divine actions show how Luther applies God's providence on the level of the individual in history. However, in what way do foreordination and providence extend, in a broader context, to the level of a nation and to the course of history in general, as for example, in the Turkish threat? This question leads to the final component of Luther's interpretation of history, namely, to the integrant of divine sovereignty in universal perspective as effected by the two-kingdoms doctrine and the *Wunderleute Gottes*.

*God's Sovereignty Over the Nations and History
Understood in Relation to the Two-Kingdoms
Doctrine and the Wunderleute Gottes*

In a discussion of Luther's concept of universal history and his eschatology in particular, it is important to note that Luther assumes with utter seriousness the presence of two warring cosmic forces which affect the day-to-day course of nations:

God and Satan are personally engaged in this same conflict, the conflict between the Word of God and the traditions of men each laboring to destroy the works and to subvert the doctrines of the other, like two kings laying waste each other's kingdoms.²⁶

This indicates that, for Luther, divine sovereignty with respect to universal history must be understood in light of an ongoing cosmic struggle between transcendent powers, namely God and Satan; otherwise, the human mind will not grasp the true meaning of historical events. However, within this framework how does God exercise successful sovereignty? The answer lies largely in Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms and the *Wunderleute Gottes*, to which we now turn.

As shown above, Luther argues that God effectuates universal sovereignty through two fundamental means, namely by the application of the principles of the two-kingdoms concept and by the activity of the *Wunderleute Gottes*. Luther develops the two-kingdoms doctrine in part one of his treatise entitled *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523), in which he divides "the children of Adam and all mankind into two classes, the first belonging to the kingdom of God, the second to the kingdom of the world."²⁷ The latter kingdoms, the divinely instituted secular authorities as credited by Luther in his *Large Catechism*, constitute "the hand, flues and agents through which God

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 93.

²⁷LW 45:88.

gives all [good] things [to us]."²⁸ Furthermore, in *Temporal Authority*, Luther indicates that the wielding of force by the government is permissible on the following basis:

If this were not so [the rightful use of the sword or force by the government], men would devour one another, seeing that the whole world is evil and that among thousands there is scarcely a single true Christian. No one could support wife and child, feed himself, and serve God. The world would be reduced to chaos.²⁹

As discussed below, Luther invokes the important distinction between the two kingdoms in his discussion of the Turkish threat. We turn now to the second principle by which Luther suggests God accomplishes his foreordination on the level of the course of nations.

In commenting on Psalm 101 (1534) Luther presents a most striking analysis of the nature and important historical role of the *Wunderleute Gottes* (God's miracle people). God fashions two kinds of individuals on earth: the common person and the outstanding individual. Human beings in the latter category are divinely tailored for a privileged purpose as follows:

Some have a special star before God; these He teaches Himself and raises them up as He would have them. . . . For God, who puts it into their heart and stimulates their intelligence and courage, also puts it into their hands that it must come to pass and must be carried out; that was the case with Samson, David, Jehoiada, and others.³⁰

According to this, Luther attributes genius (later illustrated particularly by military genius), heroic courage, and the like, not to natural endowment as such, but rather to the immediate creation of God. A closer connection between God and the course of history could hardly be imagined. For example, in discussing Psalm 101:1 the reformer addresses the linkage between God and history as follows:

In Persia He [God] raised up King Cyrus; in Greece, the noblemen Themistocles and Alexander the Great; among the Romans, Augustus, Vespasian, and others. . . . Hannibal was . . . one created by God Himself to be a master of this art [military science].³¹

The list of miracle people could be easily multiplied. In fact, Luther traces the accomplishments of major figures from selected biblical characters to those in his own day. Luther presents an example of the

²⁸WA 30/1:136, lines 8-9, my translation.

²⁹LW 45:91.

³⁰LW 13:154-155.

³¹LW 13:155-156.

latter category: "The sainted Duke Frederick, Elector of Saxony, was created to be a wise prince, to rule and carry on his affairs in peace."³²

Thus, through the instrumentality of divinely established earthly kingdoms and divinely ordained miracle-men leadership, God patiently works out the process and pattern of universal history. The following two quotations taken from Luther's comments on his beloved Psalm 118 (1529-30) and Psalm 127 (1527), respectively, are among his clearest concerning the meaning of history:

Do you not see the gun being loaded? . . . And the bullet? . . . He shot the obstinate Jews with the Romans, the Romans with the Goths and the Wends, the Chaldeans with the Persians, and the Greeks with the Turks.³³

And even though they prevail for a while, to God this is barely a beginning. . . . Who permitted them to rise a little and then always knocked them over, one after the other.³⁴

These two passages describe Luther's understanding of divine direction among the nations, and the termination of certain nations raises the issue of the possible end of history, or the overall problem of eschatology in the thinking of the reformer. This brief analysis of Luther's theology of history prepares the way for a discussion of Luther's eschatological evaluation of the Turkish threat to German national existence, to which we now turn.

*Luther's Eschatological Appraisal of the Turks in Light
Primarily of His Interpretation of Daniel Chapter
Seven in Eine Heerpredigt Wider den Türken*

Having briefly noted some of the components of Luther's theological interpretation of history, we now sketch the historical background to the Turkish peril in Luther's time and his developing thought concerning this problem.

The Turkish Problem

In the early years of the sixteenth century, Muslim forces overran the Balkans and Hungary with amazing ease, crushing nearly all resistance. By the autumn of 1529 Turkish detachments under General Suleiman the Magnificent were storming Vienna itself.³⁵ In view of this serious threat to German national existence, Luther was compelled to come to grips theologically with the Turkish issue early in his career.

³²LW 13:157.

³³LW 14:74.

³⁴WA 15:370, see lines 15-27, as translated by Bornkamm, 60.

³⁵For some historical details I am informed by Forell, "Luther and the War Against the Turks," 258, and Edwards, 97-114.

He felt it necessary to account theologically for the appearance of such a serious threat to the security of the German empire in light of his view, noted earlier, that God ordains all governments to a divinely appointed task. Thus, it was incumbent for Luther to articulate a proper German, Christian attitude and response to the invading Turkish army. Should the believer take up arms against the foreign invaders? As might be expected, Luther's thinking on the matter underwent moments of development over time.

*Luther's Developing Attitude Toward
the Turkish Threat (1517-1529)*

As early as 1517, we find important initial indications of Luther's attitude toward the Turks. In the fifth of the ninety-five theses, Luther asserts a fundamental theological principle which he will use later without distinctions to argue against armed resistance to the Turks: "The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons."³⁶ One implication of this thesis is that the pope's jurisdiction extends only over those penalties which are imposed on earth by earthly powers. However, as Luther later insists, the Turkish invasion is a divine penalty for sin rather than a papal penalty. Thus Luther concludes that the pope should not summon soldiers to violence against the Turks even in the name of a holy war, because this would constitute a serious circumvention of the will of God.³⁷ Luther makes this notion explicit in the lead thesis of the thirty-fourth article of "An Argument in Defense of All the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther Wrongly Condemned in the Roman Bull" (1521): "To make war against the Turks is nothing else than to strive against God, who is punishing our sins by means of the Turks."³⁸

In an explanatory letter to Georg Spalatin dated December 21, 1518, Luther indicates why he took this position:

I argued that no such war should be undertaken. I am still of the same opinion until I shall be refuted with better reasons. . . . Now that the clergy is sunk in the depths of avarice, ambition, and luxury, and now that the fate of the Church is everywhere most wretched, there is no hope for a successful war or victory. As far as

³⁶LW 31:26.

³⁷My attention was first drawn to this interpretation of Luther's fifth thesis by Buchanan, "Luther and the Turks 1519-1529," 145-146.

³⁸*Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1930), 3:105.

I can see, God fights against us: so first we must win Him over with tears, pure prayers, holy living, and pure faith.³⁹

Here we find Luther's fundamental theological position regarding the method by which a Christian should resist the Turks, namely, by pure prayers, faith and holy living. However, with the alarming presence of Suleiman's forces at the very gates of Vienna, Luther began to make important distinctions in his theology concerning the response German Christians should make toward this military threat. These distinctions appear mainly in his well-known tract, *On War Against the Turks* (1529).

Whereas Luther had formerly resisted the war effort against the Turks, he comes to its defense theologically by evoking his regulative two-kingdoms doctrine. As noted earlier, Luther distinguishes two kinds of authority, namely the temporal authority of civil government and spiritual authority invested in the church which does not summon individuals to battle. Writing in *On War Against the Turks*, Luther implies that a clergyman in a leadership role on the battlefield is a frightful intermixing of the two realms:

And, too, if I were a soldier and saw a priest's banner in the field, or a banner of the cross, even though it was a crucifix, I should run as though the devil were chasing me.⁴⁰

Although Luther appeals to the famous two-kingdoms doctrine in support of his new hawkish attitude toward the Turks, in the last analysis the real justification for resistance against the enemy rests upon the notion that the divine punishing rod (the enemy) must first have clearly been removed from the hand of God:

The first thing to be done is to smite the devil, his lord, and take the rod out of God's hand, so that the Turk may be found only, in his own strength, all by himself, without the devil's help and without God's hand.⁴¹

The rod can only be withdrawn from God's hand by the body of true Christians as in concert they return to true repentance, reform, and prayer.⁴² Thus, the ultimate solution is spiritual in nature.

In a letter to Nicholas Hausmann at Zwickau dated October 26, 1529, Luther mentions his forthcoming treatise, the *Heerpredigt*. The tone of the letter shows that his developing attitude regarding the

³⁹Martin Luther, *Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, 2 vols., trans. Preserved Smith (Philadelphia Lutheran Publication Society, 1913), 1:141.

⁴⁰LW 46:168. Robert C. Schultz informs us that the treatise was printed April 23, 1529 (LW 46:159).

⁴¹LW 46:170.

⁴²LW 46:170ff.

Turkish struggle has become thoroughly eschatological in character, giving the conflict ultimate significance for the reformer:

It [the Turkish war, which Luther views as a kind of divine wrath earned by Germany] will not be a jest, but the final wrath of God, in which the world will come to an end and Christ will come to destroy Gog and Magog and set free His own, for all the prophecies of Scripture are fulfilled, though we are sure that our humble prayers can avail somewhat against that Turk who will plague us Germans not this winter only but until the end of the world, as says Daniel vii.⁴³

Similar sentiments are present in a letter written by Luther either in February or March of 1530 to Frederick, Duke of Saxony, on the occasion of the completion of the German translation of the book of Daniel: "The world runs and hastens so diligently to its end that it often occurs to me forcibly that the last day will break before we can completely turn the Holy Scripture into German."⁴⁴ These eschatological perspectives are an important aspect of the *Heerpredigt*, to which we now turn.

The Publication of the Heerpredigt

The publication of the *Heerpredigt* seems to have been sparked by two significant events subsequent to the Marburg Colloquy of October 1-3, 1529. First, while still in Eisenach, Luther and presumably the other members of his party met Friedrich Myconius who called their attention, apparently for the first time, to a commentary on the book of Daniel by a Franciscan monk named John Hilten, who had been imprisoned in Eisenach from 1477 to 1498.⁴⁵ Luther was fascinated with Hilten's application of Daniel chapters 7-9 to the Turks, because the monk had predicted the Turkish danger on the basis of these chapters.⁴⁶ Here was a possible Biblical solution to the grievous dilemma facing Christendom.

Second, while returning home from the Colloquy, Luther and his traveling party learned for the first time about the Turkish attack on Vienna.⁴⁷ George Forell appears to be quite correct when he states that "it was under the impact of this information [Hilten's commentary on Daniel] and of the siege of Vienna that he [Luther] decided to write

⁴³ *Luther's Correspondence*, 2:502-503.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 516.

⁴⁵ Headley, 245.

⁴⁶ Forell, 259.

⁴⁷ LW 49:240, note 3.

another book [*Heerpredigt*] dealing with the Turkish danger.⁴⁸ We turn now to a discussion of the key eschatological portion of the *Heerpredigt*.

*Luther's Eschatological Interpretation
of the Turks in the Heerpredigt*

The key eschatological portion of the *Heerpredigt* focuses on the details of Daniel chapter seven. First, I shall briefly review the contents of the vision (this practice is also followed in the treatise) then present and analyze selected portions of Luther's interpretation of major elements of the vision.

In Dan 7:2-14 the prophet sees four beasts of prey, each of a different species, arise sequentially out of the sea. Thus, in turn, a lion with eagle's wings, a bear grasping three ribs in its mouth, a winged leopard with four heads and, finally a beast of unidentified species but of great ferocity, follow one another from the ocean. The fourth creature is not only equipped with iron teeth by which it devours all its enemies, the beast also sports no less than ten horns. The subsequent activity among the horns becomes the central focus of the vision. Soon a little horn pushes itself up among the ten horns uprooting three in the process. The little horn itself is a striking hermaphroditic entity, composed not only of horn material but also of human eyes and a blaspheming mouth. This odd horn battles against the saints on earth until the Ancient of Days comes and destroys it and sets up an everlasting kingdom given to the saints. Here the vision ends.

Luther begins his interpretation of this scenario by establishing what he understands to be the historical referent of some key apocalyptic symbols such as beast and horn. He quotes the biblical explanation given in Dan 7:17 in order to establish the general meaning of a beast in this prophetic context. The biblical text of the *Heerpredigt* reads: "These four great beasts are four kingdoms which will come upon the earth."⁴⁹ Luther explains the historical referent of the prophetic symbol of a horn as follows: "A horn signifies a kingdom in the Scriptures as Daniel himself says that the ten horns are ten kings which are a part of the fourth kingdom."⁵⁰ (In Dan 7:24 a divine interpreter equates the ten horns with ten kings.)

Having established these basic historicist ground rules of apocalyptic interpretation, Luther applies the principles to his own

⁴⁸Forell, 259.

⁴⁹WA 30/2:164, line 23. This quotation also illustrates Luther's principle of biblical interpretation, that Scripture is its own best interpreter. For a trenchant discussion of *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, see Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Reason* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 149.

⁵⁰WA 30/2:166, lines 24-25.

understanding of history in connection with Daniel 7 by connecting beasts, kingdoms and history together:

This prophecy of Daniel can be harmoniously interpreted concerning every detail about the four following empires: The first is the Assyrian-Babylonian Empire, the next is the Medes and Persians, the third empire is that of Alexander the Great and the Greeks, the fourth is the Roman Empire which is the greatest, most powerful and cruel empire. Moreover, it is the last empire upon the earth as Daniel clearly points out when he states that after the fourth beast or empire then the Judgment follows and that there is to be no further empire except the Holy kingdom which is eternal, and so on.⁵¹

Neither in this quotation nor elsewhere in the *Heerpredigt* does Luther present as detailed an explanation of the four beasts as he offers a few months later in the introduction to his *Commentary on Daniel* (March 1530).⁵² Here he adds that the two wings of the lion represent the two "parts" of the Assyrian-Babylonian Empire, and that the three ribs in the bear's mouth symbolize the three great leaders of the Persian Empire, namely, Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes I.⁵³

Luther's main interest, however, centers on the meaning of the ten horns of the fourth beast and particularly on the significance of the activity of the little horn. He indicates that the ten horns are not successive empires, but that the horns belong to or form part of the fourth empire:

The ten horns are ten kingdoms [*Königreiche*] which belong to the fourth empire [*Kaisertum*]. . . . These same horns form the empire thus they are part of the Roman Empire since in its complete power it stands as, namely, Spain, France, Italy, Africa, Egypt, Syria, Asia, Greece, Germany and so on.⁵⁴ Such land the Roman Empire has obtained by means of great strength.⁵⁵

This characterization harmonizes well with Luther's earlier paraphrase of the prophetic requirements of the fourth beast. In the paraphrase

⁵¹WA 30/2:166, lines 1-8.

⁵²Like the *Heerpredigt*, Luther's *Commentary on Daniel* also apparently remains unpublished in English.

⁵³WA, *Die deutsche Bible*, 11/2:10, lines 28-29; 11, line 29; 12, lines 1-3.

⁵⁴Luther omits only one of the ten kingdoms in this list—*Anglia*—which is inserted into his *Commentary on Daniel*, WA 11/2:12, line 15 and note 3.

⁵⁵WA 30/2:166, lines 24-29.

Luther asserts that the fourth beast "will be mightier than any realm and will devour and tread down any land."⁵⁶

This is a necessary prelude in the *Heerpredigt* to Luther's enthusiastic exposition of the identity and activities of the little horn. First, he insists that the little horn cannot be one of the ten horns just identified, but that it must be active among the ten kingdoms as the prophecy specifies.⁵⁷ He takes his cue from history as to the identity of the little horn:

The Romans have obtained such land [the ten kingdoms] of old, then the Muhammadan or Turk comes. Now Daniel says that after the ten horns arrive, then a little horn appears among the ten horns. It comes and proves to be the Turk.⁵⁸

In order to support his interpretation that the little horn is the Turkish power, Luther points out that the little horn has not only arisen from a small beginning, but that "it also has grown up, disposed and captured three kingdoms of the Roman Empire, namely Egypt, Greece and Asia."⁵⁹ A second reason Luther offers in favor of identifying the Turks with the little horn is the fact that the Turks had possessed two of the ten horns, namely Egypt and Asia, in its power for a long time, but that only in his day had Greece been won by the Turks.⁶⁰ The implication is that the recent Turkish capture of Greece fulfills the specifications of the prophecy in terms of the number of horns to be deposed, and consequently points to the historical power signified by the conquering little horn—the Turks.

Next, Luther gives a helpful summary of the interpretation presented thus far in reference to the little horn:

Just as we assuredly hold at this point that the same little horn is the Muhammadan and his kingdom, so we can now just as easily and clearly learn from Daniel how the Turk and the Muhammadan Kingdom should be interpreted. Furthermore, we can learn what the Turk means to God. First, he is certainly to be a mightier lord than the three horns in the Roman Empire, that is to say, it conquers and holds three of the best kingdoms, for example, Egypt, Greece and Asia and thereby is mightier than any king among the ten horns. This is the clear meaning of the text and turns out to be so in action, because no king which has been in the Roman Empire, for

⁵⁶WA 30/2:165, lines 17-20.

⁵⁷WA 30/2:166, lines 12, 25.

⁵⁸WA 30/2:166, lines 29-32.

⁵⁹WA 30/2:167, lines 5-7.

⁶⁰WA 30/2:167, lines 7-10.

example, the French Kingdom, Spain, *Welschland*,⁶¹ and so on, is as powerful as the Turkish or Muhammadan Kingdom including those kingdoms which the Turk now possesses. Furthermore, there is no king except the Turk who sits practically in the center of the Roman Empire, yes, in the Roman Emperor's house at Constantinople. This is signified by the fact that the little horn is situated among the ten horns of the fourth beast.⁶²

Luther pauses briefly in his interpretation to reflect on the significance of the human parts of this unique horn:

The horn has human eyes, that is, he rules according to Muhammadan's Koran or law. In this law there is no divine eye, rather, in it there is only vain human reason without God's word or spirit.⁶³

Thus the human eyes and mouth represent human notions as opposed to the divine revelations from God contained in the gospel and in other biblical teachings.

Finally, Luther brings out two significant eschatological implications of his interpretation. First, because "Daniel gives the Turks no more than three horns,"⁶⁴ which Luther has already identified as Egypt, Greece and Asia, the Germans can rejoice in the knowledge that "the Turks henceforth will conquer no more land of the Roman Empire."⁶⁵ Thus, Luther predicts that the German-speaking region will not fall to the Turks. An additional exegetical backing for this comforting conclusion is that a fifth world empire will not arise upon the earth, because Daniel had not seen a fifth beast.⁶⁶ If the Turks were to become an empire like Rome, "Daniel would become a liar, and that is not possible."⁶⁷

The second implication is perhaps more significant. Because the vision predicts the destruction of the little horn, the current war against the now fully developed little horn seems to imply the possibility of the imminent end of history, as the *Heerpredigt* explains:

⁶¹ *Welschland* may refer to a French-speaking district of Switzerland.

⁶² WA 30/2:168, lines 3-14.

⁶³ WA 30/2:168, lines 15-17.

⁶⁴ WA 30/2:172, lines 2-3.

⁶⁵ WA 30/2:171, lines 25-27.

⁶⁶ WA 30/2:166, lines 13-17.

⁶⁷ WA 30/2:166, line 19.

Christ has given a sign by which one can know when the Judgment Day is near. When the Turk will have an end, we can certainly predict that the Judgment day must be at the door.⁶⁸

This is the major eschatological moment in the treatise, which was anticipated in Luther's letter to Nicholas Hausmann, October 26, 1529, quoted earlier.

Luther devotes the remaining portion of the *Heerpredigt* to further appeals to personal sacrifice in the struggle in terms, for example, of financial contributions and if necessary, of life itself.⁶⁹ We turn now to a brief discussion of the theological consequences and implications of the *Heerpredigt* concerning Luther's ongoing evaluation of the Turks, the significance of the Reformation, and finally the steadfastness of Luther's own theological posture.

Luther's Subsequent Attitude Toward the Turks

The question arises whether Luther retained his late mid-career (1529) eschatological convictions concerning the Turks to the end of his life.⁷⁰ According to my reading of the material to date, this question can be tentatively answered in the affirmative. However, Luther does broaden his basis for the expectation of the coming of the Lord. Five years before his death in 1546, Luther writes, in his *Appeal for Prayer Against the Turks* (1541), the following words about the proximity of the Day of Judgment, "That day [the Day of Judgment] cannot be far distant."⁷¹ In addition, according to table conversations recorded by Heydenreich, Luther expresses a similar attitude one year later in the summer or fall of 1542 in the following manner, "I think the last day is not far away. My reason is that a last great effort is now being made to advance the gospel."⁷² These and other sources which could be presented suggest that Luther held rather consistently throughout his career to his basic eschatological opinions developed in light of the Turkish threat.

Concluding Reflections

Among important theological implications which can be quarried from *Heerpredigt*, three merit special attention. First, based largely upon Luther's eschatological statements regarding the Turks presented in the

⁶⁸WA 30/2:171, lines 18-21.

⁶⁹E.g., WA 30/2: 175, lines 9-11; cf. Buchanan, 159.

⁷⁰For a major study indicating that Luther's mid-career spans the years 1521-1530, see Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-career 1521-1573* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

⁷¹LW 43:235.

⁷²LW 54:427.

Heerpredigt and discussed in this study, one may conclude that at least during the latter portion of his mid-career (1529) the reformer held the eschatological position that the final cosmic struggle was unfolding before his eyes. In the *Heerpredigt* the following words, "Das is der klare Text und findet sich also im Werk," seem to be his refrain which he sings over each new step in his interpretation.⁷³ Thus, Luther's reading of contemporary events carried ultimate eschatological significance not only because it involved the violent conflict of a final battle, but, above all, because it promised the return of Christ to establish a kingdom of eternal peace.

Second, in light of Luther's views concerning the Turkish threat noted above, the Reformation may have been conceived not simply as one more historical step, albeit an important one, among other steps yet to come in a divine plan of theological reform. On the contrary, given the profound eschatological implications of the Turkish threat, Luther may have conceived the Reformation to be the final divinely ordained step of reform before the end of history. Such a view of the Reformation would, perhaps, confer upon the Reformation in the minds of its original human framer and his associates perhaps the greatest significance possible, and would clearly charge its message with the utmost sense of urgency.

Finally, such a self-understanding may help to explain one cause of Luther's theological intractability. Participation in a movement so conceived would have offered privileges and grave responsibilities. For example, a founder might be driven by the conviction that the original shape of the reform ideals must be preserved. Why? To admit the need of major theological revisions would tend to jeopardize the Reformation's claim to finality. If present in his thinking, this element may have helped to shape Luther's own adamant theological intractability. On principle the Reformation must not be theologically altered because it is God's complete, final reform movement, the headstone of the historical church of God, which is to usher in the Kingdom of Glory. Such theological implications indicate why Luther's *Heerpredigt* is indeed a rich mine not to be ignored.

⁷³WA 30/2:168, lines 9-10. A free rendering of this line is as follows: "This is the clear meaning of the text which is confirmed by the process of history."