

# THE **Unreformed** MARTIN LUTHER

*A Serious (and Not So Serious)  
Look at the Man Behind the Myths*

---

ANDREAS MALESSA

*The Unreformed Martin Luther: A Serious (and Not So Serious) Look at the Man Behind the Myths*

© 2017 by Andreas Malessa

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., 2450 Oak Industrial Dr. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505.

The original German edition was published as *Hier stehe ich, es war ganz anders*. Copyright © 2015 SCM-Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, Holzgerlingen, Germany ([www.scm-haenssler.de](http://www.scm-haenssler.de)).

Translation by Matthew L. Hillman

English adaptation by Dennis R. Hillman

Map of Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation by Erwin Webber.

Copyright [LutheranReformation.org](http://LutheranReformation.org). Used by permission.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in reviews.

Distribution of digital editions of this book in any format via the Internet or any other means without the publisher's written permission or by license agreement is a violation of copyright law and is subject to substantial fines and penalties. Thank you for supporting the author's rights by purchasing only authorized editions.

Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)

ISBN 978-0-8254-4456-2

Printed in the United States of America

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 / 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <i>Foreword by Paul L. Maier</i> . . . . .                                      | 5   |
| <i>Preface</i> . . . . .  | 7   |
| 1 Luther Was a Superstitious Person . . . . .                                   | 13  |
| 2 Luther Was Upset About the Selling of Indulgences . . . . .                   | 20  |
| 3 Luther Planted an Apple Tree. . . . .   | 30  |
| 4 Luther Was a Poor Farmer's Son . . . . .                                      | 33  |
| 5 Luther Was a Boozer . . . . .   | 36  |
| 6 Luther Translated the First German Bible . . . . .                            | 43  |
| 7 Luther Ate While Preaching. . . . .   | 49  |
| 8 Luther Intended to Establish an Independent Church . . . . .                  | 54  |
| 9 Luther Sometimes Played Tricks and Told Lies . . . . .                        | 67  |
| 10 Luther Married in Secret . . . . .   | 72  |
| 11 Luther's Wife Traveled to Him in a Fish Barrel . . . . .                     | 79  |
| 12 Luther Said, "Here I Stand. I Cannot Do Otherwise." . . . .                  | 85  |
| 13 Luther's Most Important Insight Came While<br>He Was on the Toilet . . . . . | 92  |
| 14 Luther Was a Warmonger . . . . .   | 98  |
| 15 Luther Did Not Want to Translate the Old Testament<br>into German . . . . .  | 104 |
| 16 Luther Was the First Lutheran . . . . .                                      | 108 |
| 17 Luther Wanted to Make a Name for Himself. . . . .                            | 116 |
| 18 Luther Named his Supporters "Protestants" . . . . .                          | 123 |
| 19 Luther Invented German Proverbs . . . . .                                    | 126 |

|    |  |     |
|----|--|-----|
| 20 | Luther Nailed Ninety-Five Theses to the Wittenberg Church Door . . . . . | 132 |
| 21 | Luther Threw an Inkhorn at the Devil. . . . .                            | 139 |
| 22 | Luther's Last Words Were, "We Are Beggars, That Is True." . . . .        | 141 |
| 23 | Luther and His Wife Had Spectators During Sex . . . . .                  | 146 |
| 24 | Luther Recommended That Husbands Take a Second Wife. . . . .             | 150 |
| 25 | Luther Was an Anti-Semite . . . . .                                      | 154 |
|    | <i>Bibliography</i> . . . . .  | 162 |

## Foreword

The greats of history seem to have one thing in common: however dramatic their lives, inevitably legends, myths, and fables are added to the historical record, either by tradition or the intent of biographers. Gnostic authors added ridiculous details to the life of Jesus of Nazareth, much as Parson Weems did centuries later, with more noble intentions, to George Washington.

Martin Luther was no exception. Both friends and foes added unhistorical addenda to the facts of his life. This book by German author Andreas Malessa is a collection of many of the most familiar stories about Luther. Perhaps the most controversial is his claim that when Luther stood before Emperor Charles V, he did not crown his defiant defense with the famous words, “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise”—since court reporters did not preserve these words and they are only attested much later. (John Foxe, a younger contemporary of Luther, wrote in his famous *Book of Martyrs* that Luther closed his defense with the words, “Here I stand and rest. May God have mercy on me”—which may lend authenticity to this traditional statement after all.)

Debunkers can certainly be killjoys. But they are necessary to keep truth about the past clear and accurate. These pages are no hostile assault on the life of Luther. On the contrary, they often correct the record on the cruder myths generated by his opponents, such as the claim that Luther was a drunkard, a liar, and even someone who ate at the pulpit while preaching.

Anything but a rehash of Luther's life, this book is immensely readable and well crafted, and will provoke laughter on nearly every page—thanks to Luther's own blazing sense of humor and to the Hillman son-father team's skillful translation and adaptation of the original German edition.

Martin Luther's colorful life story has no need for embellishments of any kind since facts alone qualify him as one of the most dramatic in history. He was "The Man of the Second Millennium," a towering figure who changed the world. This embattled ex-monk had to fight on two fronts for the rest of his life: against the medieval Catholic Church on the right, which excommunicated him for daring to reform the church, and the radical revolutionaries on the left, who claimed that Luther had not gone far enough. All the while he accomplished what seemed impossible: tearing down unbiblical traditions but rebuilding the church, thus doing the work of half a dozen theologians. Such a life needs no enhancements whatever. Bravo to Andreas Malessa for identifying the enduring greatness of Luther.

PAUL L. MAIER  
Professor (Emeritus) of History  
Western Michigan University

## Preface

When someone becomes a famous personality, adored by millions of fans and puffed up by the media, they inescapably achieve star status (or at least become a celebrity of sorts). And predictably, as celebration gives way to cynicism, the entertainment press and investigative journalists want to peel back the public mask and reveal the “real” person. Reporters try to find (or invent) weaknesses, mistakes, and, preferably, scandals. The rule seems to be: “First the hype, then the story.” So run the daily ups and downs in the entertainment excitement curve.

Historians are already in one sense investigative journalists when it comes to Martin Luther, but the public face of Luther—the mythic Luther—has been shaped by many others. In serious, academic tones (like historians)—but using methods similar to that of journalists—the media, the church, and the culture-shapers have created this great historical figure, a Luther gilded in polished gold. That will certainly be the case during this year, the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. The Luther hype will predictably lead a handful of professional historians to say, “Well, it was actually totally different.”

I’m not an investigative journalist—and neither do I want to be—and although I like church history and theology, that’s not where I began my research on Luther. I have asked students and teachers, workers and retirees, friends and colleagues, what they know about Martin Luther and the Reformation. I have come across legends, horror stories, terribly wrong

quotes, and, above all, many little half-truths and funny myths. I have noted all of them. And with them and my responses to them, I would like to inform (as well as amuse) you. Yes, and perhaps also shock you—the sixteenth century is not for the faint of heart.

The Weimar edition of Martin Luther's complete works includes all his books, Bible commentaries, sermons, table talks, lectures, essays, leaflets, and records. The Weimar edition is about eighty thousand pages long, bound in 121 volumes. There are 2,585 letters that Luther wrote and 926 letters that were written to him. There are so many texts that one could prove almost anything about Luther as well as furnish the respective counterargument with quotes from his contemporary friends and enemies. It's not hard to find evidence to corroborate the view that Luther was all of these:

the traumatized child and the respectful son  
 the self-tormenting ascetic and the tippler  
 the vulgar churl and the sophisticated poet  
 the affectionate husband and the domineering macho man  
 the popular speaker and the intellectual genius

The complexity of Luther's personality only increases when other characterizations are considered:

Luther the sly politician  
 Luther the pious prayer  
 Luther the free thinker

Luther himself already knew what would happen after his death: "Now everyone wants to be heard first and each wants to spill out their thoughts. On this topic the preacher Solomon said rightly, 'of making many books there is no end!' You will still be amazed, when I lie in the ground, how many books will be written about me."<sup>1</sup>

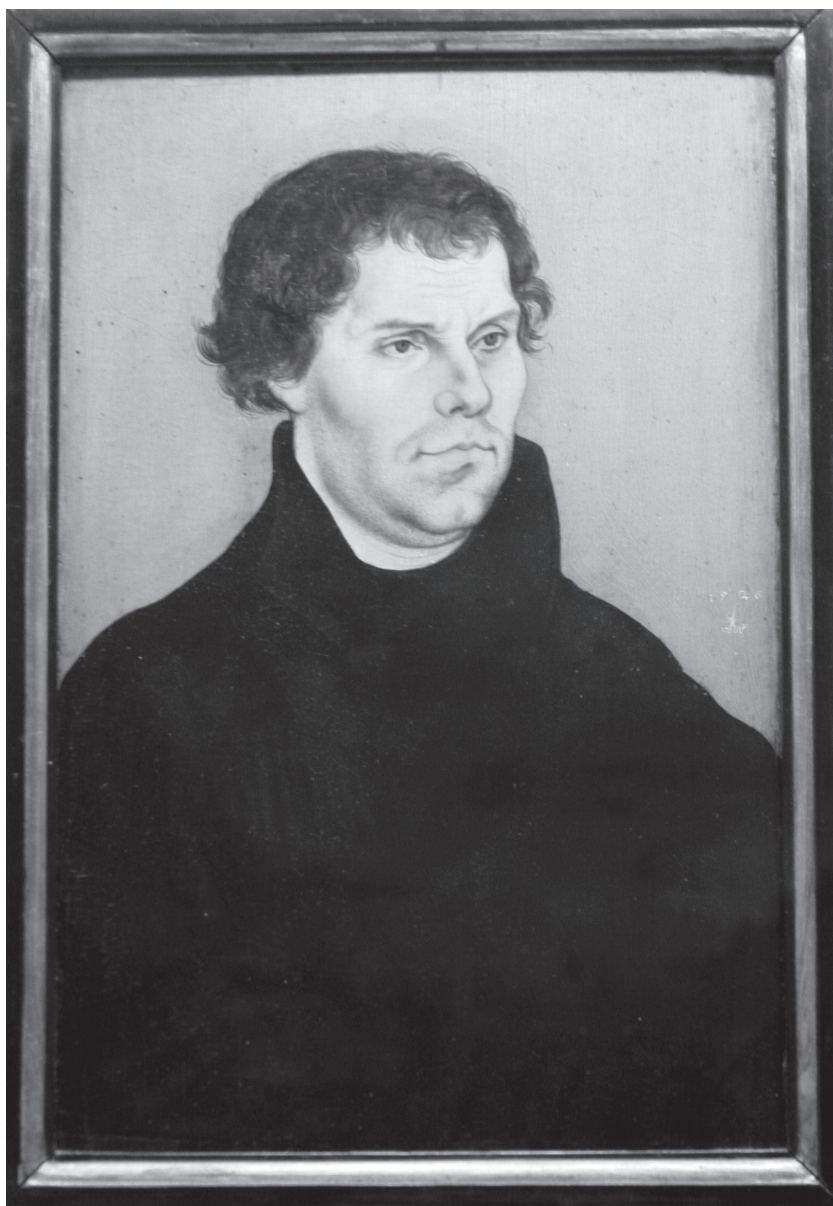
---

1. Krumbholz, *Euch stoßen*, 28.



I acknowledge my own guilt in this accusation. So, have I distilled here the “real” Luther by pulling back the mask and discovering the man beyond the myths? Most likely not—at least not completely. But perhaps by the end of this short investigation, you will be curious about which thoughts and feelings, which life experiences and God experiences, of this very distant man are very near to us today, and still affect and concern us in the five-hundredth anniversary of Luther’s historic actions in Wittenberg. If so, I will be very happy indeed.

ANDREAS MALESSA



Portrait of Martin Luther, 1525, by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)  
National Museum of Fine Art, Stockholm, Sweden

THE **Unreformed**  
MARTIN LUTHER



Central Europe in the time of the Reformation

## Luther Was a Superstitious Person

Was Martin Luther superstitious? If so, he would be in good company. In March 2014 the Evangelical Church in Germany published their fifth sociological church member study titled *Commitment and Indifference*. The survey results showed that 14.8 percent of evangelicals believe in amulets, stones, or crystals, and 22 percent have an affinity for astrology. Of those who attend church weekly, 22 percent believe in the power of stones or jewels, while only 12 percent of those who never or rarely (less than once a year) attend services hold a similar view.<sup>1</sup> So according to this study, “worldly” forms of religions are more likely inside the church than outside the church. Churchgoers are more superstitious than nonchurchgoers.

Not to be outdone, more than 25 percent of Americans admit to being very or somewhat superstitious when it comes to knocking on wood, walking under a ladder, breaking a mirror, or having a black cat cross one’s path.<sup>2</sup> And when categorized by religious affiliation, 20 to 30 percent of Catholics and Protestants believe in these common superstitions.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, atheists and agnostics come in significantly lower

---

1. “Engagement und Indifferenz,” Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland.

2. Moore, “One in Four Americans Superstitious.”

3. “Superstitions Held by Americans in 2014,” Statista.

at 18 percent and below—which must be convenient for them when it comes to cats and ladders.

Here one is tempted to quote Luther, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, although Luther meant it seriously: “I do not want to prophesy about the future of Germany based on the stars, but I dismiss it to the wrath of God from theology! It is impossible that Germany will get off without a hard punishment.”<sup>4</sup> That certainly sounds like Luther had no truck with astrology and assorted superstitions.

So was Martin Luther, the stalwart leader of the Reformation, superstitious or not? As best as can be known, the answer is yes, he was. This is not a fallacy about Luther, but a fact—and he sometimes had a bad conscience about it, ironically.

The worldview of the medieval mind was magical, mystical, and full of menacing puzzles. Nature was populated with angels, devils, witches, fairies, trolls, and undead, as well as half-human, half-animal creatures. Culture was full of oracles, secrets, fates, and taboos. Houses and clothes were decorated with and protected by powerful amulets and symbols. Esoteric mutterings, alleged secret lore, the spirituality of natural powers—all were self-evident and common sense in the spiritual climate of the time.

Martin’s mother, Margarete Luther (born Lindemann), was from a small village. Her daughter died suddenly of cot death (now called SIDS). Margarete was firmly convinced that a neighbor was an evil witch who had cursed her little Magdalene. When the suspected woman was beaten to death and laid on the village green, Martin’s mother expressed no dismay, but rather relief. According to her, “Satan took back one of his own.”<sup>5</sup>

Later in Luther’s life—some twenty-three years after Wittenberg had become the center of the Reformation—a woman named Prista Frühbottin was burned to death in the Wittenberg market square on June 29, 1540. The accusation: weather magic and pasture poisoning (two sorts of crimes the modern mind certainly must puzzle over!). Lucas Cranach the Younger, a German Renaissance artist, even painted the scene of her

---

4. Schilling, *Luther zum Vergnügen*, 170.

5. Süßenguth, *Aus einem traurigen Arsch*, 16.

execution as a kind of old-school crime photojournalist, so to speak. So it's safe to say that Luther and Wittenberg were hardly sociopolitically enlightened in our modern sense of the term.

The Catholic theologian and Frankfurt capitular (Catholic administrator) Johann Cochläus claimed in his 1549 biography of Luther that the good-looking Margarete Lindemann amused herself passionately with the devil and thereby conceived the baby Martin (no doubt his opponents thought Luther was a cheeky devil already). Not surprisingly for the times, this slander was not discounted even among the educated class as tasteless nonsense but was discussed as a serious possibility.

Luther himself believed in similar ideas: "Prussia is full of devils, and in Lappland there are many wizards. In Switzerland there is a sea on a high mountain, which they call Pilatus Sea—there is where the devil rambles. Near my home, there is a pond on top of Pichel Mountain. When one throws a stone in the pond, a large storm emerges."<sup>6</sup> Luther not only personally believed these ideas but he stated them publicly.

From May 1521 until March 1522 Luther had to hide himself in the Wartburg, a castle in the town of Eisenach. Luther was on his way home after his legendary defense of his writings at the Diet of Worms.<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther's friends "kidnapped" him so the trip back home would not end with Luther being burned at the stake. He lived in a part of the spacious fortress that was only reachable by a set of folding attic stairs. Twice a day he was provided with something to eat by two servants who only knew that he was a foreigner with the name Sir George.

Luther was lonely—but evidently not alone. He thought that there was a poltergeist in his room:

Now they had brought me a sack of hazelnuts, which I ate and locked in a chest. When I went to bed at night, the poltergeist

---

6. Krumbholz, *Euch stoßen*, 42.

7. While this phrase can hardly be read in English without a bit of a smirk, a "diet" was a deliberative assembly, in this case of the Holy Roman Empire with Emperor Charles V presiding. It was held in the city of Worms, which was an imperial city.

came to me for the hazelnuts—with one hand after the other he pounded on the wood very hard, troubling me in the bed. And when I finally got a little sleep, the thing made such a rumble on the stairs, it was as if someone had thrown a dozen barrels down the stairs. I knew, of course, that the stairs were locked and protected with chains and iron so that no one could throw barrels up and down the stairs. I woke up and wanted to see what was there, but the stairs were locked. Then I said, ‘If you’re there, so be it then!’ I commend me to the Lord Christ, of whom it is written, ‘*omnia subiecisti pedibus eius*’ [‘you have everything under your feet’], as it reads in Psalm 8, verse 6. And then I went back to bed.<sup>8</sup>

Luther’s courageous stand against the poltergeist alone at night in a castle attic may well amaze us today. For some, it brings out a sense of pious wonder—“There you can just see how secure he was in Jesus, just how steadfast this man of faith was!”

Then again, one can also interpret this from a religious and psychological point of view and say, “There you can see how naturally and self-confidently he dealt with manifestations of the supernatural.”

Another person could just as well explain this with a dry sobriety and say, “A sack full of hazelnuts can attract mice or may have already contained some. They were rustling around and obviously creating a startling commotion.”

Or one can be amazed that anyone would take this story at face value at all. They might say, “Of course, Luther told this story years later during his famous ‘table talks,’<sup>9</sup> and perhaps, to add a little more interest, he exaggerated in the retelling a little bit.” If so, he would not be the first preacher of the gospel who believed a little exaggeration never hurt a good story!

---

8. Krumbholz, *Euch stoßen*, 38.

9. Not talks about tables, but short sermons delivered around meal times. More on them in chapter 7.



If Luther had ever been challenged about this story, he could have mentioned another person who was awakened by the poltergeist in the same room in the castle: the wife of the captain of the castle, Madame von Berlepsch, who occasionally lived separated from her husband in 1521. Luther says, "Then came Hans von Berlepsch's wife toward Eisenach and sensed that I was in the castle, and would have really liked to have seen me. However, it couldn't be. They brought me into another chamber and put up the same woman from Berlepsch in my chamber. There, she heard such a rumble in the night that she thought there were a thousand devils inside."<sup>10</sup>

However, with this "chief witness" of the Wartburg poltergeist, Luther's account becomes somewhat suspicious. How likely is it that one would accommodate a noble lady, of all people, in a secluded and haunted room? Why did she not stay the night in the luxurious chamber of her husband? That points to a seemingly ended marriage. How did Luther know about the lady of Berlepsch's experience when it officially "couldn't be" that they could encounter one another? From what we know, those questions have no satisfactory answer.

However, there may be another explanation for all this turmoil in the tower. We know from Luther's letters during this period that he suffered terribly from loneliness and from sexual desires, a troubling experience, no doubt, for a celibate monk. "I'm burning in the great fire of my untamed flesh. I should be rutting in spirit as I am in the flesh."<sup>11</sup> As Luther struggled against the seductive torments of sexual thoughts, did his own inner psychological struggles intensify his perception of the havoc among the hazelnuts? Perhaps, but we don't know.

As early as the late 1520s, however, a distinction between a more critical and rationally minded Luther and the medieval, magically minded, and superstitious Luther was becoming apparent, typically with the Bible as the instrument of this demystification. "The devil cannot frighten me so much that I break out in sweat during sleep. I don't worry about the

---

10. Krumbholz, *Euch stoßen*, 38; Wolf, *Luther*, 222.

11. Diwald, *Luther*, 246.

dreams or omens. I have the Word of God. That is enough for me. I also don't want an angel to come to me. I would not believe him now."<sup>12</sup>

Also with respect to faith in horoscopes and the anxious following of constellations, Luther developed a critical distance, but not due to scientific reasons: "Signs and stars were not therefore created to master me, but for my benefit and service. Night and day they shall rule, but over my soul they shall have neither rule nor power. The sky was made to give light and time. The earth to support and feed us."<sup>13</sup> Casually expressed: stars are created, not creating. So with age, Luther gained a somewhat critical distance from superstition. He would later write, "There is nothing more powerful in the world as superstition, but before God it's an abomination."<sup>14</sup>

---

"The devil cannot frighten me so much that I break out in sweat during sleep. I don't worry about the dreams or omens. I have the Word of God."

---

Interestingly, a close friend of Luther's—a very intelligent, accomplished linguist, and almost always a very rational person—cared a lot about astrology: Philip Melanchthon.<sup>15</sup> "He interprets a lot from astrology," Luther observed. Melanchthon was so influenced by the recommendations and warnings of his personal horoscope that he refused to cross the wooden bridge over the Elbe River in the city of Wittenberg with Luther one day because his horoscope forbade it. The more practical Luther suggested they stop by a pub on the near side of the Elbe instead. Luther, quite unsuperstitiously, later said, "Philip Melanchthon

---

12. Schilling, *Luther zum Vergnügen*, 40.

13. Krumbholz, *Euch stoßen*, 46.

14. Luther, *D. Martin Luther's Werke*, vol. 25, 267.

15. Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560) was Luther's collaborator, who systematized Luther's ideas and is considered the intellectual leader and second founder of Lutheranism. And a bit of a scaredy-cat about bridges.

stays here because he looks at the stars; I stay here because I look at the bottom of my beer jar. The result is the same. He doesn't want to go home because he's afraid of the water—and I because I still want to have my drink.”<sup>16</sup>

---

16. Kopp, “Horoskop und Genesis.”