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REVIEW ARTICLE

Reading Martin Luther from Legend to Life

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The saved and the damned. A history of the Reformation. By Thomas Kaufmann. Translated by Tony Crawford. Pp. xvi + 358 incl. 25 ills. Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. £35. 978 0 19 884104 3

Thomas Kaufmann's *The saved and the damned* was first published in Germany in 2017. It was therefore one of many publications that year offered to mark the fifth centennial of Martin Luther nailing up his Ninety-Five Theses (quite possibly a legendary event, as the author notes). Kaufmann's work, now available in English translation, is an unapologetically blunt assertion that 'In the beginning was Luther' (p. 6). In this it is much the same as some other English-language scholarship from 2017, such as the monumental *Oxford handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, which also began with Luther. Although a comparatively recent entry in English-language Reformation scholarship, *The saved and the damned* has already generated academic discussion and was the focus of a panel at the Sixteenth Century Society Conference in 2023.

Chapter i, totalling nine pages, introduces the book and its argument. Chapter ii is much longer and offers a forty-two-page overview of Europe *c.* 1500, noting everything from the meaning of estates to major trends in theology and devotion. But the German-speaking lands are the main focus. As Kaufmann explains, 'The ecclesiastical and political circumstances in Germany were thus very particular, and they were necessary conditions for the Reformation' (p. 33). Chapter iii is still longer, with seventy-eight pages. It studies Luther's life and thought, primarily during the 'thirteen turbulent years' (p. 53) from 1517 through 1530. Chapter

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iv offers another broad overview, this time of 102 pages, surveying European religious and political history between 1530 and 1600. Kaufmann tellingly entitles this chapter 'Post-Reformation Europe'. Chapter v, at thirty-three pages, turns to Lutheran commemorative and festive culture, beginning with the Luther jubilees, the first of which took place in 1617. The sixth and final chapter offers a seventeen-page summary and conclusion.

There are significant strengths here. Each chapter can be read profitably as a stand-alone discussion of its central topic. The second chapter is an especially cogent introduction to the sixteenth century; anyone teaching on early modern Europe could use it profitably to introduce social, political and/or religious history. Chapter v, with its survey of successive reinventions of Martin Luther, would also be valuable in courses on matters as diverse as nationalism or nineteenth-century Europe. For those seeking a conventional approach to (young) Luther, chapter ii will satisfy just as chapter iii will justify such a focus. Finally, the book's twenty-five illustrations are judiciously chosen and do much to illuminate the tangibility of the volume's headier theological and political themes.

And no doubt this is precisely what many (most?) would expect to find in a history of the Reformation. But does this amount to a persuasive argument that 'Luther is the only person without whom the "story" of the Reformation cannot be told at all' (p. 9)? While discussing Zwingli in chapter iii, Kaufmann offers a passing but crucial methodological reflection that cuts to the heart of the matter:

> When can Zwingli's work first be called 'Reformation'? The answer to this question is significant in regard to certain other urban reformers as well. Should we designate preaching which questions important phenomena of the existing church as a 'Reformation', or should we reserve the word for certain practical consequences that result from such activity? (p. 98)

Those familiar with the early modern period will already know that the vocabulary of 'reformation' was placed into widespread usage by church councils at the beginning of the fifteenth century, and used consistently by all councils through the conclusion of Trent in 1563. We do not need Luther to study early modern debates over the meanings of 'reformation'. That we now associate 'reformation' with individuals – and one individual, Martin Luther, above all – says more about us than it does about his sixteenth-century contemporaries. If our interpretive frameworks for Reformation history do not originate in the sixteenth century, they must come from later.

But how much later – and, how much later is too much later to qualify as properly academic history? The publication of this translation in 2023 regrettably brings with it a disadvantage. Scholarship generally moves slowly, but in 2016 and 2017 the Anglophone academic world saw the

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publication of two monograph-length analyses of Luther's afterlives, Thomas Howard's *Remembering the Reformation* and Peter Marshall's *1517*.[1] Together they chronicle the remarkable fluidity of later interpretations of both Luther and the Reformation. Consequently, readers are fully justified in questioning Kaufmann's view that 'Luther's reformation' (p. 91) concluded in 1530, and that everything afterwards is rightly dubbed 'Post-Reformation' (p. 132). Kaufmann and his translators inexplicably move from the lowercase to uppercase 'r' once they cross 1530, the year that chronologically demarcates chapter iii from iv. And yet, compare this with Marshall's observation that, in the later sixteenth century, Lutherans commemorated the Augsburg Confession of 1530 as the *beginning* of the Reformation.[2] It would have been valuable if *The saved and the damned* discussed its relationship to works published, especially in English, since 2017. Not doing so is a missed opportunity.

The relationship between chapters iii and iv also challenges Kaufmann's argument for Luther's priority. Kaufmann includes the sometimes-remarkable print statistics for Luther's works, but these do not result in Luther appearing as a figure of international import. For example, between 1518 and 1519, Luther composed twenty-two works in Latin and eighteen German works, which collectively saw 136 editions (p. 77). But this was only true in Germany. Moving to other nations, Kaufmann observes that 'Luther was reprinted earlier and more often in Holland than in any other country' – but now with fifty-three texts across sixty editions appearing by the time of his death in 1546 (p. 137). Luther's popularity declines still further when we look elsewhere. Of fifty-four known Protestant texts translated into Italian by 1566, only fourteen were by Luther (pp. 146–7); the first edition of his collected works appeared in France at the beginning of 1519 (p. 139), but Kaufmann finds little else to note. And in England, he writes, 'Luther himself does not seem to have had a particular theological influence in any phase of the English history of the Reformation' (p. 142). It is a recognition that cannot be squared with other material in the book, such as Myconius' claim that the Ninety-Five Theses suffused 'all Christendom in four weeks, as if the angels themselves had been couriers and brought them before all people's eyes' (quoted on p. 3), or Kaufmann's view that Luther 'was read by everyone everywhere' (p. 82). Once the quantitative data is taken into account, Luther appears not as a European superstar but as a largely German *Wunderkind*, whose sudden surge of popularity *c.* 1517–30 saw uneven influence elsewhere in Christian Europe.

[1] Thomas Howard, *Remembering the Reformation: an inquiry into the meanings of Protestantism*, Oxford 2016; Peter Marshall, *1517: Martin Luther and the invention of the Reformation*, Oxford 2017.

[2] Marshall, *1517*, 81.

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For the present reviewer, chapter v is by far the most intriguing, and it raises a somewhat subversive question. Would *The saved and the damned* have been organised more effectively if the first substantive chapter was not on Europe in about 1500, but on the Luther jubilees and their afterlives? This might have been an apt approach, not least given Kaufmann's claim, made in the opening chapter, that 'A history of the Reformation that remains bound up in national histories cannot escape the shadow of the nineteenth century' (p. 3; see also p. 238). Perhaps it is only after we study later hagiographical and historiographical layers that we can peel them back, thereby revealing the historical Luther (as opposed to the Luther of religious or national faith) more clearly. Reading Kaufmann's book backwards (so to speak) allows a different – but, I think, more compelling – historical narrative to emerge.

It goes something like this. Since the demise of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, Martin Luther has been a crucial figure in German national folklore. Sometimes, he even functioned as a totem reflecting Germans' global aspirations. A good example is the claim, made by Johann Gottlieb Fichte in 1806, that Luther's reformation was the 'last great, and in a certain sense complete, world-historical deed of the German people' (quoted at pp. 248–9). No doubt we are inclined to believe our own propaganda, and in the decades that followed such rhetorical excess invited still further excess, along with equally impassioned belief. By 1914, German historians could even claim that 'The modern era begins with Luther' (quoted at p. 256). The repeated marshalling of Luther throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggests that, for many Germans, although Luther lived in the past, he also pointed the way to a new world-historical future. This need not be taken as a cryptic reference to Hitler and the Nazis, but there is no escaping the fact that they easily deployed Luther for their own ends, not least due to his late but horrific anti-Jewish writings (an issue that Kaufmann discusses briefly at pp. 232 and 244, but has written on more extensively in his excellent volume *Luther's Jews*).[3]

The popular belief in Luther as a German national hero of universal import was built upon an older, more narrowly circumscribed hagiography rooted in Lutheran confessional and devotional culture. A key development was the creation of Luther jubilees, the first of which was celebrated in 1617, and which Lutherans – occasionally with other Protestants – have celebrated every subsequent hundred years. In his own lifetime, Luther was understood in prophetic terms as a teacher and restorer of true

[3] Thomas Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews: a journey into anti-semitism*, Oxford 2016.

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Christianity. Sometimes he was even credited with miraculous powers. In many ways, this religious Luther *cultus* was closer to the historical Luther than the later nationalist variant. For in his own lifetime, as Kaufmann notes, prophecies were attached to Luther's life and ministry (for example, pp. 2, 60, 270–1) – hardly a surprise given the apocalyptic tenor of the period. And yet, the print history of Luther's writings suggests that his import was largely limited to the German-speaking peoples of sixteenth-century Europe, even if his comparatively brief but unforgettable popularity through the mid- to late 1520s sometimes had influence elsewhere.

Today, scholarship on Luther appears an attempt at splitting the difference between the religious and nationalist cults of Luther reception. Perhaps this is why 'Luther' and 'Reformation' are so easily rendered synonymous – and this despite the fact that Luther literally anathematised individuals and developments now too easily lumped together *via* the well-worn historiographical label 'Protestant Reformation'. Kaufmann's work exemplifies this two-fold tendency. On the one hand, and in continuity with the fundamentally religious nature of Luther's life and career, *The saved and the damned* pays closest attention to theological content. The historical Luther was a religious figure, not a political saviour. On the other hand, Kaufmann still wants to ride the nationalist wave that renders Luther a singular figure of international influence and import. Thus Kaufmann writes that 'The history of the Reformation cannot be recounted without the person of Martin Luther' (p. 56), and he concludes with a survey of global Protestantism. However unwittingly, we today remain heirs of the nineteenth-century paradigm, in which Luther's transnational priority is presumed rather than demonstrated, and then set within a framework of rigorous historical analyses of Luther's broader sixteenth-century context.

But can we really have it both ways? Why should we want to? Lutheran religious conviction became mainstream academic history in the nineteenth century and, as *The saved and the damned* illustrates, it remains such still today. The book offers a fine overview of current trends in Reformation scholarship, most especially the widely accepted view that Martin Luther is the *sine qua non* of later sixteenth-century European religious and political history. But even as Kaufmann recognises the development and influence of later interpretations, he does not ask whether and how we can control for their influence, and begin revising our own historical understanding of the sixteenth century. We are instead given a theological assessment, offered in the penultimate paragraph of his conclusion, that 'Luther has long ceased to be an infallible doctor of the church, even in the churches that bear his name' (p. 286). But once stripped of their religious aura, arguments about Luther's historical significance can only appear as quaint. Perhaps that is how they should look.

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