

# MEET MARTIN LUTHER

*A Sketch of the Reformer's Life*

Anthony Selvaggio



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*Meet Martin Luther*

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## *Chapter 1*

# **The Young Luther**

Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, Niccolo Machiavelli, Christopher Columbus. These are just a few of the transformative historical figures whose lives spanned the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This was the period of the Renaissance, when the continent of Europe flourished with creativity, artistic expression, exploration, and scientific discovery. It was a time that irreversibly altered the course of Western civilization. During this time there lived a man named Martin Luther (1483–1546).

Arguably, Martin Luther, and the Protestant Reformation that he set in motion, eclipses all of these other great figures and their contributions to the development of Western civilization. It is not an exaggeration to declare that he changed the world. The ripple effects of his significance continue to be felt and experienced by the Western world to this day. Even after nearly five hundred years, Martin

Luther is still relevant, particularly to every Christian who refers to himself or herself as a Protestant.

Clearly, such an influential person is worthy of study simply because of his historical and theological significance, but this is not the only reason to study the life of Luther. As with the lives of biblical figures like Hosea and Jonah, Luther's life provides us not only with historical fact but also with theological truth. It is a story of the gospel itself in that it not only presents us with dates, facts, and fascinating events but also provides us with an object lesson of faith, grace, and the forgiveness that can be found only in Jesus Christ. This is what makes Luther's life so worthy of our time and attention: it points us to Jesus and the enduring power of His death and resurrection.

### **The Mansfeld Years: The Son of Hans and Margaret Luder**

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483, to Hans and Margaret Luder. Martin chose to change his surname from Luder to Luther in 1517 because the latter was etymologically related to the Greek word for "free" or "freedom." Of course, the freedom that Luther experienced in 1517 was

his newly found understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

On the day following Martin's birth, Hans and Margaret presented Martin for baptism. Parents did not delay baptizing their children in those times due to the high rate of infant mortality. He was baptized on the Feast of Saint Martin, and thus his parents bestowed on him the name of that patron saint.

Martin was born into a world in which life was hard. Death was ever present as plagues ravaged Europe. Most people were peasants, and very few had the privilege of education. Martin was fortunate enough to be born to parents who possessed both industry and family connections that opened the doors of educational opportunity to him.

Luther's father, Hans, was not from a noble or rich family. This meant he could not rely on inheriting wealth or land. Instead, he had to seek his own fortune in the world. He saw promise in the copper industry and thus moved his family to Mansfeld, a region of Germany known for its flourishing copper mines. Mansfeld was Martin's home during his early childhood, and he remained there until 1497.

Hans was an industrious and ambitious man. He labored in the copper mines for seven years, eventually purchasing his own mine. He subsequently acquired additional mines, gradually working his way up to an upper middle-class existence and becoming a respected member of his community. He even served as a member of the Mansfeld city council. Although Hans worked his way up the socioeconomic ladder, he did have some help as he climbed. That help came from his capable and connected wife, Margaret.

Margaret Luder, affectionately referred to as Hanna by her family, did not come from peasant stock; rather, her family was both educated and socially connected. She was a part of the Lindemann family, a well-established and well-regarded family from Eisenach. The Lindemanns were committed to education, and, as we shall see, they played a significant role in Martin's own education. They would not only help Martin navigate the world of higher education but would also help Hans establish himself in the copper industry. Hans required capital to purchase his mines, which he obtained through loans. It is likely that the Lindemanns assisted him in securing this credit. It



seems clear that Hans's success was partially linked to Margaret's family.

Martin's mother was a stern and dutiful woman. As the Luder family had no servants during Martin's childhood years, his mother's days were filled with domestic labor and the responsibilities of rearing and disciplining young children. At times, his mother exacted rather severe punishment on Martin for his transgressions. One time he was caught in the act of stealing a nut, and his mother struck him so forcefully that she drew blood. Martin never forgot that incident. Her role in his life has sometimes been neglected, with historians tending to focus solely on the influence of his father, but that would render an incomplete picture of Luther. His mother loomed large in his life. Her social background and family connections, as well as her stern discipline, served as catalysts for the man that Luther would become.

Interestingly, Martin's mother would also become a target for the slander perpetrated by his enemies. One of the more wicked acts of slander against his mother was that his birth was the result of her having bathhouse relations with the devil.

These charges persisted throughout Martin's life, and he once remarked regarding their futility,

If the Devil can do nothing against the teachings, he attacks the person, lying slandering cursing, and ranting at him. Just as the papists' Beelzebub did to me when he could not subdue my Gospel, he wrote that I was possessed by the Devil, was a changeling, my beloved mother a whore and a bath attendant.<sup>1</sup>

Both Hans and Margaret Luder desired to see that Martin was educated. During his years in Mansfeld, he attended school there. It is likely that he received rather strict instruction from his teachers as they schooled him in the basics of Latin, logic, rhetoric, and grammar. From the accounts of this period of Martin's life, he apparently did not stand out as an exceptional student. His own reflections from this period display his disdain for the often arbitrary application of corporal punishment meted out by the teachers.

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1. As quoted in Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006), 88.

Martin's early years in Mansfeld represent the foundation for the remainder of his life. He had the benefit of being born to upwardly mobile parents who valued education and were willing to sacrifice to see him benefit from such education. His mother also connected him to a level of nobility and educational access that was available to very few in his time. As we shall see, these connections would prove key to the educational advancement that equipped Martin to be a scholar, theologian, and future leader of the Reformation.

### **Luther Prepares for University: Magdeburg and Eisenach**

In 1497, at the age of thirteen, Martin left Mansfeld to pursue additional education. His first destination was Magdeburg, where he continued his education for one year. At Magdeburg he was placed in the custody of the Brethren of Common Life, a lay religious group created by a Dutch-inspired reform movement. The Brethren did not operate a school but rather provided lodging, oversight, and guidance to boys attending school away from home. The goal of the Brethren of Common Life was to reinforce the nexus between learning

and piety, with an emphasis on the former serving the latter. They stressed a life of simple piety rather than the strict system of vows that governed life in many monastic communities of the time. There was an element of anticlericalism in the history of the Brethren of Common Life: this resulted in the Brethren coming under scrutiny from official church orders like the Dominicans, who once accused the Brethren of heresy. At one time historians placed great weight on the Brethren's influence on Luther, claiming that the seeds of his revolt against Roman Catholicism were sown in the anticlerical soil of his time with them in Magdeburg. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that their influence on Luther has likely been overstated, particularly given that Luther was with them for only one year.

Luther took the next step in his education in 1498 when he moved to Eisenach. In his three years studying there, he began to blossom as a student. This was a time of intellectual awakening for Luther because it was there he encountered Wiegand Geldennupf, a teacher who sparked Luther's intellectual curiosity. Up until this point, Luther's educational experiences were far from favorable,

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and his recollection of them primarily focused on the harshness of his teachers and the beatings he had received. He even used the word “torture” to describe those early educational experiences. That changed at Eisenach as the rote memorization drills that dominated his early education gave way to creative and critical thinking. Here, Luther was exposed to great classical authors like Virgil and to great works like *Aesop’s Fables*. Luther learned both effective oration and persuasive writing skills. This was a happy time in Luther’s life, and he later recounted it with fondness.

His years at Eisenach were influential for reasons beyond the quality of his formal education experienced there. In Eisenach, Luther had the privilege of being taken into the home of Heinrich Schalbe, an influential man who eventually became mayor of Eisenach. It appears that the Schalbe family had connections to the Luders, likely through his mother’s side of the family in particular. In the Schalbe home he had the privilege of participating in what Luther described as the “Schalbense Collegium,” a moniker he bestowed because of the climate of intellectual and pious conversation he experienced there.

Luther also made another dear friend in Eisenach—Johannes Braun, the vicar at the Church of Saint Mary. Although significantly older than Luther, he served as a friend as well as a role model. Even after Luther moved on from Eisenach he maintained correspondence with Braun in which he revealed his warmth and affection for his mentor. He once described Braun as his very closest friend. As we shall see, Luther was a man who cultivated and relied on close personal friendships marked by loyalty, intimacy, and trust. During his life he had some deep friendships that exerted a great deal of influence on him.

As Luther neared the end of his three-year program of study at Eisenach, his teacher Wiegand Geldennupf and the school's wise headmaster, John Trebonius, recognized that Luther had the intellectual gifts to pursue further education at university. It was uncommon for a young man from Luther's social strata to attend university at this time, and it would have been a significant commitment and sacrifice for his family, but Luther's father approved of him pursuing additional studies at university. It is likely, once again, that the influence of his mother and her well-educated family was a major

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contributing factor in Luther's ability to continue to pursue his education.

### **A Scholar Is Born: The Years at Erfurt**

The next step in Luther's academic journey was the University of Erfurt. The city of Erfurt was a place of commerce surrounded by fortified walls, which gave its inhabitants a sense of security and safety. It was also a place of significant religious activity, with one thousand of its twenty thousand inhabitants being part of some religious order. In fact, Erfurt was so well known for its religious emphasis it was often referred to as "little Rome." It was within the city's fortified walls that young Martin would come of age as a scholar.

Luther entered the University of Erfurt in 1501. The university was the third largest in Germany and had a sound reputation. His choice to study there likely reflects the influence of his mother and her family. Many members of the Lindemann family had chosen to study at Erfurt, and it is likely that his mother and her family prodded Luther in this direction.

Luther earned his bachelor of arts degree in just one year, completing it in September of 1502.

He completed his master of arts degree three years later in January of 1505. During his time at Erfurt, Luther was subjected to a rigorous course of studies, and his life was extremely regulated. Here he was exposed to the thought of Aristotle, whose works served as the core scholarly authority for most European universities. Perhaps one of the most lasting features of his education at Erfurt was the two years Luther spent debating various aspects of Aristotle's thought. These debates required students to use logic and rhetoric in a public setting to advance their respective positions. It was here that Luther learned to handle himself in contentious public disputations and to refine his persuasive writing skills. These two skills, public debate and persuasive writing, would serve Luther well in the future as he entered the intense debates during the Reformation.

When Luther began his studies at Erfurt he was not among the top of his class, but he worked extremely hard and quickly rose through the ranks of the student body. This was a pleasant and enjoyable time for Luther. He generally liked his classes and instructors. The University of Erfurt was a verdant intellectual environment that exposed



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Luther to the innovative scholarly and philosophical debates of his day. By the time he completed his master of arts in 1505, Luther was a well-trained academic.

Luther recounted attaining his master's degree as one of the most splendid events in his life. He reveled in the ceremonies surrounding his accomplishment. This was a tremendous achievement, particularly given the relatively modest socio-economic status of his family. His father began referring to him as "Master Martin" with fatherly pride. It was expected that a student who had completed his master's would next pursue one of the three prominent professional courses of study—law, medicine, or theology. It was clear which course his father preferred—Hans Luder wanted his son to be a lawyer. Luther initially followed his father's wishes for his life and enrolled to study the law, but the course of his studies and life would soon take a very different direction. Luther had experienced great academic success, but he was also about to experience the first major crisis of his life.