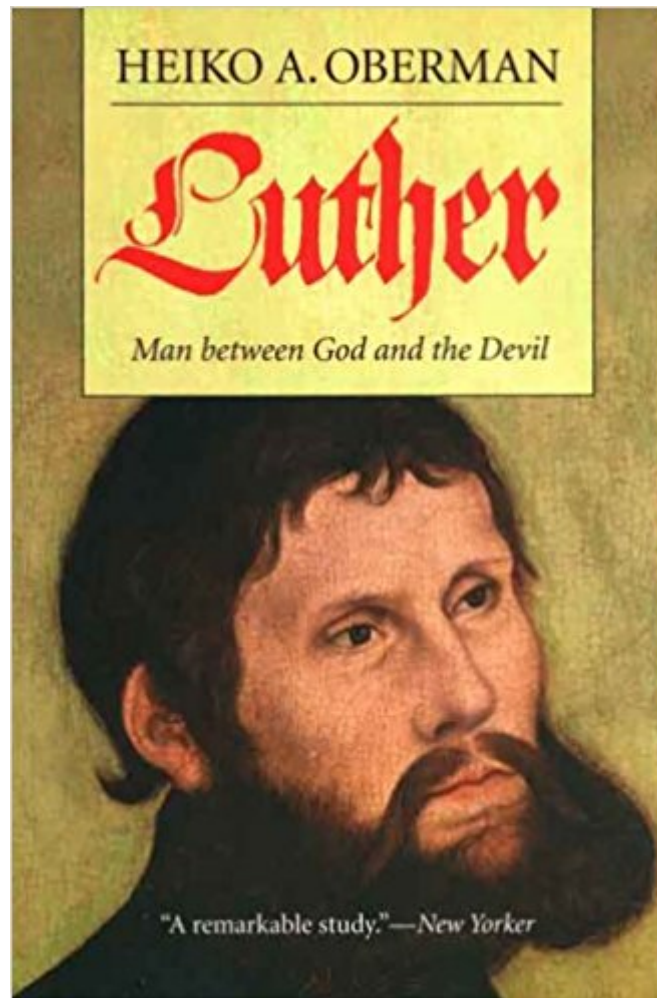




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# Luther: Man Between God And The Devil



## Synopsis

Written by one of the world's greatest authorities on Martin Luther, this is the definitive biography of the central figure of the Protestant Reformation. "A brilliant account of Luther's evolution as a man, a thinker, and a Christian ... Every person interested in Christianity should put this on his or her reading list." —Lawrence Cunningham, *Commonweal* "This is the biography of Luther for our time by the world's foremost authority." —Steven Ozment, *Harvard University* "If the world is to gain from Luther it must turn to the real Luther — furious, violent, foul-mouthed, passionately concerned. Him it will find in Oberman's book, a labour of love." —G. R. Elton, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*

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## Customer Reviews

In Oberman's startling portrait of Martin Luther, we meet an obstinate monk of volcanic temperament, for whom Christ and the Devil were equally real. "Luther proclaimed the Last Days, not the modern age," asserts this University of Arizona history professor. The rebellious monk, we learn, called himself doctor, preacher, or professor, but never "reformer," and never spoke of his movement as the "Reformation." His achievement lay in "horizontalizing" Christian ethics by proclaiming that good works are crucial for survival in a threatened world. This weighty study gives full attention to aspects of Luther's career that other biographers have sought to minimize, such as his savage attacks on Jews and his scatological invective against the Devil. Oberman brings us

closer to the real Luther. Illustrated. Copyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Oberman believes that we can best understand Martin Luther as a man of the Middle Ages who believed that he was literally involved in a mortal struggle with the devil incarnate and that the pope was the Antichrist of the Last Days. The original German edition of this brilliant, sympathetic psychobiography of the father of the Reformation won the Historischer Sachbuchpreis, a special prize given the outstanding historical work of the decade 1975-85. Walliser-Schwarzbart's English translation is smooth and unobtrusive, and the illustrations supplement the text admirably. Highly recommended for readers willing to meet Oberman's intellectual and theological challenges.-

Richard S. Watts, San Bernardino Cty. Lib., Cal. Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Oberman, Heiko A., *Luther, Man between God and the Devil*, Translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989) Paperback edition published 2006. This is the third biography I have read of Luther, and it may be the best single volume 'intellectual' biography, which deals a bit more with those currents which influenced his thought than some other volumes. In this regard, the closest comparison would be to *Martin Luther* by historian, novelist, and playwright Richard Marius. Both books virtually stop their story somewhere between 1525, the date of Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*, his most important theological work, and 1530, the date of the Marburg Colloquy, shortly before the death of Ulrich Zwingli. Oberman does carry on to touch the highlights of Luther's married life with Magdalena Luther. He even dedicates some time to Luther's frequent bouts of bad health, starting around 1518. This included the tragicomic incident where Luther felt he was on death's door, in 1537, due to a kidney stone, which prohibited him from passing water. Philipp Melanchthon, based on some astrological determination, suggested that he postpone a coach ride back to Electoral Saxony, his 'motherland', for one day, since it was at the new moon. The bumpy carriage ride dislodged the stone, which passed. Then, Luther 'almost drowned in his own water'. Oberman, like Marius, is very light on the political events in Luther's life. It does cover the desire for independence of the north German estates from Roman canon law and the Pope, which contributed to Luther's safety in the early years of his excommunication and ban. For a more complete, albeit a bit less deep picture of Luther's whole life, the standard source is Roland Bainton's *Here I Stand*, first published in 1950. I have not read Martin Brecht's three volume biography of Luther, but judging from the reviews on the volumes, that is the place to go if you want

the full picture of Luther's life, times, and thought. One work Oberman discounts is Eric Ericson's *Young Man Luther*, which makes much of Luther's strict upbringing as a child of late medieval German middle class parents. In this vein, Oberman also discounts the influence of matters relating to the bathroom on Luther's thinking, even if Luther claimed that he got one of his breakthrough ideas in the bathroom while 'hiding out' in the Wartburg castle of his protector, Elector Fredrick the Wise of Saxony. One thing I see for the first time here is the extent to which Luther had a distinct 'potty mouth', at least in his polemical writings. Since it does appear in his own words, it is far easier to believe than the depiction of Mozart in an early scene in the play and movie, *Amadeus* by Peter Shaffer. Oberman tells us just enough about this style to let us believe this was not uncommon among writers of that age. The other side of the coin is that many reports on how Luther conducted himself at all the many diets, disputations, and lectures he attended indicate that he was quite the gentleman in person. One of the more interesting threads in Oberman's book is his trace of Luther's intellectual influences. It confirms what I have heard elsewhere that Luther was deeply influenced by the nominalist school of late Medieval philosophy. The foundation of that movement was the works of the Englishman, William of Occam. Oberman quotes Luther as saying "My master Occam was the greatest dialectician". This alliance with Occam's thought did not spring from sterile soil. Luther studied for several years at the University of Erfurt, which had one of the best Arts schools in German speaking lands. The Arts faculty at Erfurt was committed entirely to the nominalist way of thinking. But German nominalist thought did not come entirely from Occam. Heidelberg had Marsilius von Inghen and even more important from Tübingen was Gabriel Biel. Luther began at Erfurt just as new textbooks based on the nominalist teachings became available from Erfurt professors, Jodokus Trutfetter and Bartholomaeus Arnoldi. The foundations of Luther's whole point of view can be traced to his espousal of nominalism. The doctrine denied the existence of abstract ideas, as espoused, most famously, by Plato. Every 'idea' such as 'justice' or 'salvation' was only a name, which owed its existence entirely to what we can experience with our five senses. Now where does that leave theology. The only eye-witness accounts we have of salvific events is the Bible's account of Jesus life, the direct experiences of Jesus, such as that of St. Paul, and of all writings which can be seen as precursors to that experience of Jesus. In other words, the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Thus, Luther discards all theological doctrine which cannot be traced back to scriptural authority. One famous Lutheran statement is when he characterizes 'reason' as the 'devil's whore'. This is easily misinterpreted to a belief that Luther had no use for reason at all. This could not be more wrong. Luther clearly uses it to infer dogma from scripture. What Luther rejects is what will later be called 'natural theology', theological principles deduced from a starting point

outside scripture, such as René Descartes' famous 'I think, therefore I am'. 'Natural Theology' was practiced by the medieval schoolmen, especially Thomas Aquinas, as when he cites the five arguments for the existence of God. One of Luther's other major influences was St. Augustine, in whose name Luther's monastic order was founded. From Augustine, Luther's strong sense of being very near the 'Last Days'. Augustine's City of God was written in troubling times, shortly after the fall of Rome in 410. Similarly, Europe had just gone through several generations of plagues in the fourteenth century, and the Ottoman empire was close to beating down the doors to both Italy (via Egypt) and Vienna. From this, Luther became intent on the notion of the Antichrist, and his identifying the Pope in Rome as that figure. To Luther, the authority of the Pope and of the Church councils may have been an even greater danger than reason. This is because, by their nature, the pronouncements go beyond scripture, and Luther was able to demonstrate how the Councils could not be 'infallible' since they often disagreed with one another. One of the more interesting events in Luther's career is his clash with Desiderius Erasmus over freedom of the will. In many ways, one would expect Erasmus and Luther to be allies. Both were major linguistic and classical scholars, and Luther depended heavily on Erasmus' new Greek edition of the New Testament. But where Luther championed Augustine, Erasmus' hero was Jerome. Where Erasmus was the leading light of the north European Renaissance, Luther was the vanguard of the Reformation. While Erasmus was the Epicurean, to whom controversy was distasteful, Luther was the immovable object, who no controversy could budge. It's ironic that the controversy was due in part because they shared a common enemy, Hieronymus Aleander, the special papal legate to the Diet of Worms. 'Aleander thought Luther incapable of electrifying the masses and far too stupid to have authored such erudite writings. The monk was nothing but a straw man for the person really pulling the strings. And there was only one person ingenious enough to initiate such an effective, dangerous campaign against Rome: Erasmus of Rotterdam.' Aleander woefully misjudged both men. For a superior single volume biography of Luther's ideas, this one is hard to beat.

A well done tome that focuses upon aspects of Luther's life that are glossed over or ignored. It gives a clarity to who influenced him and how. Well written and an enjoyable read, especially for those who have read other biographies on the man.

If you know something about Luther already, this is a great book for going deeper into his story and theology. Very enlightening.

Arrived in excellent condition

This was not what I expected. The author wrote as a historian & theologian, combined. It's a very deep read and will take some time. I don't agree with the author on all points and at times felt he was supporting the Roman Catholic Church and/or denouncing Luther. It would have been more interesting if the author would have provided information on exactly how followers of Luther started the Lutheran Church.

Delves into what went on in the mind of a man born in an age which stifled each man's search for meaning, and how he was able to move beyond his culture and relate to God through Christ.

Worth every minute, even the note notes are impressive.

A very fair and well researched book about Martin Luther.

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