

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Schilling, Heinz. Martin Luther: Rebell in einer Zeit des Umbruchs

Hilmar M. Pabel

Volume 36, Number 4, Fall 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090974ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v36i4.21002>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Pabel, H. (2013). Review of [Schilling, Heinz. Martin Luther: Rebell in einer Zeit des Umbruchs]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 36(4), 188–190. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v36i4.21002>

Schilling, Heinz.

Martin Luther: Rebell in einer Zeit des Umbruchs.

Munich: C. H. Beck, 2012. Pp. 714. ISBN 978-3-406-63741-4 (hardcover) €29.95.

With an eye on the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, Heinz Schilling has produced a masterful biography of the Reformer whose theses on the power of papal indulgences led to profound religious, social, and political divisions in the Holy Roman Empire and in Europe. Biography is a new *métier* for Schilling, with whom we have long associated the application of the confessionalization paradigm to Reformation research. Not surprisingly, the theme of confessionalization emerges often. The Reformation harnessed a “social disciplining” whose aim was the Christianization of society (361). The “new theology of grace and salvation” drove a “Protestant Christianization,” which produced members of a “Protestant ‘confessional society’ and ‘confessional culture’” shaped for centuries by “Luther’s culture of the word,” his “interpretation of heavenly and earthly realities,” his Bible, hymns, and catechism (521, 522). Luther’s theological controversies contributed to the formation of a Lutheran and “papal” theology and laid the foundation of a “Roman Catholic confessional church that took shape in parallel with the formation of a Protestant church” (386).

Five essential characteristics of Luther inform Schilling’s biography—namely, skill in manipulating the printed word, penchant for polemic, aggressive opposition to the papacy, self-conscious prophetic bearing, and a pessimistic outlook on humanity. Central to Luther’s identity was his *Prophetentum* (176, 290), which he understood as “the grace of God revealed to him and only to him in the study of the Bible” (290). Luther the prophet arose to insist on the necessity of education as a tool for understanding God’s word. As “God’s prophet,” reflecting on military resistance against the Catholic Emperor, he knew that “he should not confuse the realms and polities in which he had a role to play” (486). Rebellion was a dimension of Luther’s prophetic nature. Luther was a rebel against the papacy and for the doctrine of justification by faith alone. He was no political revolutionary. The “iron character,” “implacability,” and “volcanic temperament” (619) of Luther the prophet existed alongside his affability and his love of language and of music.

Schilling emphasizes the religious and theological foundation of Luther’s life and thought. He refers to the student, professor, and monk as Luder until

he became “a new person,” the liberated (*eleutherios*) Luther, on account of the “newly won relationship with God” rooted in his theology of God’s righteousness (170). Luther’s theology of grace undergirded his understanding of marriage as well as his restructuring of the church. His political thought was “political theology” (476). His revaluation of the social structure of the three estates at the expense of the privileged clergy and to the advantage of all walks of life, especially marriage and family, led to a “radical secularization” (516). Yet this secularization, typical for its time, did not diminish or eliminate religion as a public force but integrated religion more deeply within society. All history for Luther was the history of salvation. “Luther’s terrible hateful utterances against Jews” did not beat a direct and necessary path towards National Socialism; they were not the product of racism but must be understood *heilsgeschichtlich* (551, 569).

The recognition of the powerful theological impulse in Luther does not always, however, plumb the depths of his thinking. Schilling ought to have explained why *The Freedom of a Christian* was “the most coherent foundational text of a new Protestant church” (196). He provides the historical context for Luther’s famous Reformation treatise without analyzing its contents.

The biographical narrative is, on the other hand, more historically responsible and enriching. Punctuated with appropriately integrated illustrations, the narrative proceeds chronologically. Schilling, like most scholars, sees 1525 as an important turning point in the public life of the recently married Luther against the background of the bloody defeat of German peasants in revolt. He exposes misinterpretations that have often hardened into shibboleths. The indulgence controversy was a product of late medieval theology. Luther’s critique of indulgences was more compatible with loyalty to the church and tradition than an expression of a revolutionary mentality. The meeting of the excommunicated monk with the young Emperor Charles V was not a collision between modernity and the Middle Ages but a contest of plans for harmonizing new developments with tradition. Luther’s commitment to “his Germans” did not evince nationalism but reflected his understanding of the Germans as part of God’s people in the economy of salvation. Sexuality did not precipitate his marriage but rather was his discovery within marriage. The substantial chapter on Luther’s marriage, family, and household is one of the best in the book.

Schilling’s *Luther* should take its place as an authoritative historical study: more accessible than Martin Brecht’s magisterial three-volume biography and

more comprehensive than Heiko Oberman's *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*. Apparently, only Jesus has received more biographical attention than Luther. No doubt, more biographies will appear as we approach 2017, but Schilling's will serve as a standard substantial introduction for some time to come. Translations are in order and will enhance Luther's perennial appeal to a new generation of Reformation scholarship.

HILMAR M. PABEL, *Simon Fraser University*