

**MEET MARTIN LUTHER**



# 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,