

»For he is coming«^{*}

Revisiting Martin Luther's Reaction to the Reformation's First Executions

By Robert J. Christman

On July 1, 1523, Hendrik Voes and Johann van den Esschen, two little-known friars from the Augustinian cloister in nearby Antwerp, were burned alive on the Grand Plaza of Brussels for maintaining heretical Lutheran doctrines, thereby becoming the first victims of the Protestant Reformation.¹ News of the event sent a shockwave across Europe and set a gruesome precedent for all sides in the coming struggle, but few were more

* I am grateful to Robert Kolb for reading an early draft of this essay and for the helpful suggestions he made to improve it.

1 Many historians have addressed this event from various angles. Some have examined the event itself. See, for example: D. AKERBOOM / M. GIELIS, »A New Song Shall Begin Here [...]«. The Martyrdom of Luther's Followers among Antwerp's Augustinians on July 1, 1523 and Luther's Response (in: *More than a Memory: The Discourse of Martyrdom and the Construction of Christian Identity in the History of Christianity*, ed. by J. LEEMANS, 2005, 243–270); P. KALKOFF, *Die Anfänge der Gegenreformation in den Niederlanden*, 2 vols., 1903/1904, particularly in chapter six; O. CLEMEN, *Das Antwerper Augustiner-Kloster bei Beginn der Reformation* (Monatshefte der Comenius-Gesellschaft 10, 1901, 306–313); and IDEM, *Die Ersten Märtyrer des evangelischen Glaubens* (in: IDEM, *Beiträge zur Reformationsgeschichte aus Büchern und Handschriften der Zwickauer Ratsschulbibliothek* 1, 1900, 40–52). Other historians have focused on the pamphlets produced in the immediate aftermath of the event and their impact. See, for example, B.S. GREGORY, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, 1999; B. MOELLER, *Inquisition und Martyrium in Flugschriften der frühen Reformation in Deutschland* (in: *Ketzerverfolgung im 16. und frühen 17. Jahrhundert*, hg. v. S. SEIDEL MENCHI, 1992, 21–48); H. HEBENSTREIT-WILFERT, *Märtyrerflugschriften der Reformationszeit* (in: *Flugschriften als Massenmedium der Reformationszeit. Beiträge zum Tübinger Symposium 1980*, hg. v. H.-J. KÖHLER, 1981, 397–446).

moved than Martin Luther. Johann Kessler, a Swiss student studying in Wittenberg at the time, noted that when Luther heard about the deaths »he began to weep inwardly and said, ›I thought that I would be the first to be martyred for the sake of the Holy Gospel, but I was not worthy of it.«² Luther's reaction soon changed, however, for a short time later he wrote to his friend George Spalatin, »Thanks be to Christ, who has finally begun to let my, nay rather His words bear fruit.«³ What precisely Luther meant by Christ's words bearing fruit will be addressed later in this article, but for now suffice it to say that Luther saw this event as a watershed. Something new was happening. So important was this episode in his thinking that it inspired him to compose his first song, originally entitled, »A song of two martyrs of Christ, burned in Brussels by the Sophists of Leuven,« but quickly changed to »A new song here shall be begun,« the song's first line.⁴ A widely popular ballad, the song detailed the arrest, interrogations, and executions of the two men, and the aftermath of these events.

In the years to come, many individuals would be executed for refusing to recant their evangelical beliefs, and although Luther responded with compassion, none of these executions elicited in him quite the same reaction as the deaths of Voes and van den Esschen.⁵ In light of this fact, the questions this essay seeks to answer are, why did this event make such a big impression on Luther? What was the precise nature of that impression? Why did he then decide to express it in song, a medium new for him at the

2 »[...] hatt er angefangen innerlich zu wainen und gesagt, ich vermaint, ich solte ja der erste sin, der umb diß hailig euangelion wegen solte gemarteret werden, aber ich bin des nitt wirdig geweßen.« J. KESSLER, *Sabatta. Chronik der Jahre 1523–1539*, 1866, 1: 241.

3 »Gratia Christo, qui tandem cepit fructum aliquem verbi nostri, imo sui ostendere [...]«. Luther to George Spalatin, 22 or 23 July 1523, WAB 3; 115, 14f.

4 Martin Luther, »Eynn hubsch Lyed von denn zcweyen Martererern Christi, zu Brussel von den Sophisten zcu Louen verbrandt«, WA 35; 411–415.

5 A number of scholars have taken up the question of Luther's response to these executions. A few of the more recent studies include: AKERBOOM / GIELIS (see n. 1); R. OETTINGER, *Music as Propaganda in the German Reformation*, 2001, 61–69; R. KOLB, *God's Gift of Martyrdom: The Early Reformation Understanding of Dying for the Faith* (Church History 64, 1995, 399–411); P. CASEY, »Start Spreading the News«: Martin Luther's first Published Song (in: *In Laudem Caroli*, ed. by J.V. MEHL, 1998, 75–94); M. RÖSSLER, *Ein neues Lied wir heben an. Ein Protestsong Martin Luthers* (in: *Reformation und Praktische Theologie*, FS W. Jetter, hg. v. H.M. MÜLLER / D. RÖSSLER, 1983, 216–232).

time? And in light of the revealing responses to these questions, just what does his reaction tell us about how he understood the Reformation at this early stage in its history?

On their surface, the answers to the first three questions appear self-explanatory, and indeed, such answers have been posited by various historians. Of course Luther would be moved when the first individuals died for an interpretation of the Bible that he had promoted; perhaps he even felt pangs of culpability. No doubt he was shocked that in distant Brussels two unknown friars were willing to die for the Gospel, and the authorities there were willing to execute them. And of course the Reformer would seek to publicize their deaths widely, as he saw them as a clear demonstration of the righteousness of his cause. These men were willing to bear witness to the truth of his views with their lives, so he must be right! And finally, well-known for his keen awareness of media, naturally Luther would choose to express his interpretation in a form that had the best chance for the broadest impact.⁶ But such explanations, while containing an element of truth, are ultimately superficial and fail to comprehend the complexity of Luther's response. As will become clear, the executions themselves came as no surprise to Luther. However, certain aspects of the event did amaze him, recalling to his mind in a most vivid way the biblical works of God. As a result, he responded in a way advocated by the Scriptures themselves – with song.

6 Such impressions are found widely in the literature. For example, CASEY writes (see n. 5), »[...] Luther constructed his ballad as an argument aimed directly at advancing the evangelical cause.« (83) And »[Luther] could use this unanticipated event to broadcast the joyous message that people were willing to die for their faith in the Word.« (90) And »[...] Luther seized the opportunity presented by the events in Brussels to exploit this sign of success of his interpretation of the Word.« (90); OETTINGER (see n. 5), 64 writes of Luther, »He wished to discredit [the Catholic Church's] version of the events and spread the news about the executions and the brave conduct of the Augustinians as quickly as possible.« And Martin Brecht surmises, »[A New Song] was a gripping ballad, which undoubtedly was intended to serve a propagandistic purpose.« M. BRECHT, *Martin Luther*, 3 vols., vol. 2: *Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532*, trans. by J. Schaaf, 1990, 103.

I Luther's Knowledge of the Situation in the Low Countries

Let us begin with the question of why the event made such a big impression on Luther. Far from being a shock, the fact that the executions took place *when* and *where* they did could have come as no surprise to Luther, for he possessed an intimate knowledge of the situation in Antwerp and was well aware that an execution there was not only possible, but probable. In fact, he was on close terms with the leaders of that city's Augustinian cloister, he was well-acquainted with those individuals charged with silencing the Augustinians (in part from personal experience), and he had a comprehensive knowledge of their tactics. Simply put, it was precisely *because* he had such a thorough knowledge of the situation in Antwerp that the actions of Voes and van den Esschen so astonished him.

By 1523 when the executions occurred, close connections between the Augustinians of Wittenberg and Antwerp had been established for some time. Since its foundation in 1513, Antwerp's cloister had belonged to the Reformed German (sometimes referred to as »Saxon«) Congregation of Augustinians, a reform group within the Augustinian order that included twenty-seven cloisters throughout Germany and the Low Countries, among them Luther's in Wittenberg. Led by its Vicar General, Johann von Staupitz, the group's cloisters in the Low Countries were located in the cities of Antwerp, Haarlem, Dordrecht, Enkhuizen, Enghein, and Ghent, and a healthy exchange in individuals and ideas between Wittenberg and the Augustinians of the Low Countries was underway.⁷

When the cloister in Antwerp opened in 1513, Staupitz named the leader of the Enkhuizen Augustinians, Jan van Mechelen, its first prior. Van Mechelen had studied in Wittenberg, receiving the title of doctor of theology in 1511. Although he never became close with Luther who was only in Wittenberg for a short time in 1508 while von Mechelen was there, von Mechelen's ties to Wittenberg bore fruit in other ways. In 1516, he sent two friars to study there, both of whom Luther personally prepared for their

7 D. GUTIÉRREZ, *Die Augustiner im Spätmittelalter 1357–1517*, 1981, 81–110, esp. 94–98. See also TH. KOLDE, *Die deutsche Augustiner-Congregation und Johann von Staupitz*, 1879.

exams. In autumn of 1517, three more brothers from the Antwerp cloister matriculated in Wittenberg, followed by another brother in autumn of 1520.⁸ And the Ghent prior, Melchior Miritsch, former prior of the Augustinian cloister in Dresden and another acquaintance of Luther, sent four young recruits to Wittenberg to study in the summer and fall of 1521/1522.⁹ All this traffic in the direction of Wittenberg is evidence of the fact that Staupitz had declared the university there the preferred location of study for brothers of the German Reformed Congregation.¹⁰

But what made the connection even closer between the Antwerp Augustinians and Luther was the two most outstanding representatives of this Saxon/Brabant exchange, Jacob Propst and Heinrich von Zutphen, both contemporaries and close personal friends of Luther. Propst (c. 1495–1562), who came from Ypres, began his career as an Augustinian in the Haarlem cloister, then served as prior in Antwerp from 1518 to 1522. Regarding him, Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote to Luther in a letter of 30 May 1519,

There is a man in Antwerp, prior of the monastery there, a genuine Christian, who is most devoted to you and was once your pupil or so he says. He is almost the only one among them all who preaches Christ; the others as a rule preach the inventions of men or their own advantage.¹¹

This description could not have been news to Luther, as Probst had come from Haarlem to Wittenberg in 1505, receiving his *magister artium* degree there in 1509. What is more, it is possible that he was also the »Jacob« who was prior in Wittenberg from 1515 to 1518, where he would have been on hand to experience Luther's »breakthrough« before returning to Ant-

8 J. VERCRUYSE, »Was Haben die Sachsen und die Flamen gemeinsam?«, Wittenberg von außen gesehen (in: Wittenberg als Bildungszentrum: 1502–2002; Lernen und Leben auf Luthers Grund und Boden, hg. v. Evangelisches Predigerseminar Lutherstadt Wittenberg, 2002, 9–32), 13.

9 Ibid.

10 O. RUDLOFF, *Bonae Literae et Lutherus. Texte und Untersuchungen zu den Anfängen der Theologie des Bremer Reformators Jakob Probst* (HosEc 14, 1985, 11–239), 113.

11 »Est Antuerpiae Prior eius monasterii, vir pure Christianus, qui te vnice deamat, tuus olim discipulus, vt predicat. Is omnium pene solus Christum praedicat: caeteri fere aut homium fabulas aut suum quaestum praedicant.« Erasmus to Martin Luther, 30 May 1519 (in: D. ERASMUS, *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami denuo recognitum et auctum*, vol. 3 [1517–1519], ed. by P.S. ALLEN / H.M. ALLEN, 1934, 607).

werp.¹² Even Probst's enemy, the papal nuncio Jerome Aleander, connected him closely to the Reformer, referring to him in a letter to the pope's Vice-Chancellor, Guilio de' Medici (the future pope Clement VII), as »the man who only preaches Luther's doctrines,« then quoting the aforementioned phrase from Erasmus's letter to Luther about Probst as proof.¹³ And Probst's connections to Luther and his teachings were undoubtedly strengthened when Antwerp's prior spent May to September, 1521 back in Wittenberg – a trip of which Aleander was well aware.¹⁴ It was during this period that Luther, who was in the Wartburg, wrote to Melanchthon, asking him to extend his greetings to a number of individuals, but not »the fat little Flemish guy« (*das fette Flemmichen*) because, indicated Luther, he would write to him directly.¹⁵ This off-handed comment, it seems, provides some insight into the close and congenial nature of their relationship.

Upon his return to the Low Countries in late 1521, however, things quickly turned dire for Probst. Under the assurance of a »friendly conversation,« he was taken prisoner by Charles V's newly established secular inquisition at the beginning of December. Interrogated frequently, and under constant threat of the stake, on February 9, 1522 he recanted to a packed St. Gudula's church in Brussels, concluding with the statement:

And I damn all errors and heresies, especially the Lutheran ones. And I embrace the Catholic faith as held and preached by Holy Roman Church. And I promise to submit myself in faith to all things that it teaches. And I now declare, just as I have promised and declared, to adhere [to it] and to cast Luther with all his dogmas far away from me.¹⁶

12 VERCROYSE (see n. 8), 13.

13 »[...]el qual sempre predicava la dottrina di Luther.« Aleander to Guilio de Medici, 2 September 1521 (in: Aleander und Luther 1521. Die vervollständigten Aleander-Depeschen nebst Untersuchungen über den Wormser Reichstag, hg. v. TH. BRIEGER, 1884, 262f).

14 In the same letter to de Medici, Aleander wrote that Probst had gone to visit Luther after the Edict of Worms was promulgated, then returned to Antwerp. Aleander to Guilio de Medici, 2 September 1521 (in: see n. 13), 263.

15 WAB 2; 349.

16 »et damno omnem errorem et haeresim, potissimum Lutherianam, et amplector fidem catholicam, quam tenet et predicat sancta Romana ecclesia, et ei me in fide et omnibus que docet, submitto et eidem promitto et jam juro, sicut jam promisi et juravi, adherere et Lutherum cum suo dogmate procul a me abjicere«. Anathematizatio et revocatio fratris Jacobi Praepositi, olim prioris fratrum heremitarum Sancti Augustini opidi antverpiensis (in: Corpus Documentorum Inquisitionis Haereticae Pravitatis Neerlandicae,

Probst's recantation was then published in Flemish and Latin.¹⁷ Freed, but prohibited from returning to Antwerp, he went to the Augustinian cloister in his hometown of Ypres, where he began again to preach Luther's ideas. Shortly thereafter he was summoned a second time by the inquisition, but escaped, arriving in Wittenberg in August, 1522. Despite his recantation, Probst remained friends with Luther, who even named him godfather to one of his daughters in December, 1534.¹⁸ In 1524, Probst was called to Bremen, where he would eventually become superintendent, but the point here is that his close relationship with Luther provided him a clear view of what was happening in Antwerp. Certainly the two men discussed the situation fully during the twenty months Probst spent in Wittenberg between his escape and his call to Bremen.

A second friendship that shed further light in Wittenberg on the circumstances among the Antwerp Augustinians was Luther's connection to Heinrich von Zutphen, who, as it turns out, Luther *did* ask Melancthon to greet in the same letter in which he referred to Probst as rotund.¹⁹ Zutphen had matriculated in Wittenberg in 1508 becoming a *magister artium* in February of 1511, then taking up the position of lector. During this period, he must have lived in the Augustinian Cloister, as all friars were required to do so.²⁰ He left Wittenberg in c. 1514, and after a short stay in Cologne was named the prior of the Augustinian cloister in Dordrecht, where he remained until 1520, then returned to Wittenberg to continue his education until 1522. It was during this second stay that he appears to have become good friends with Luther.

Upon Probst's arrest, recantation, and flight in 1522, Zutphen returned to the Low Countries where he was named prior of the cloister in Antwerp around which a cloud of suspicion hung. Continuing in his predecessor's ways, he quickly drew the attention of the inquisition. On September 29,

ed. by P. FREDERICQ, 5 vols., 1889–1902), here vol. 4, 94; this text may also be found in RUDLOFF (see n. 10), 27–37.

17 *Anathematizatio et revocatio fratris Iacobi Praepositi* was published in Latin and Flemish in Antwerp, Cologne, and Leipzig. RUDLOFF (see n. 10), 27.

18 On Luther's continuing friendship with Probst, see RUDLOFF (see n. 10), 198–204.

19 See note 15.

20 J.F. IKEN, *Heinrich von Zütphen* (SVRG 12), 1886, 7. Iken's biography of Zütphen is still the most complete treatment.

1522, under the pretext of being requested to visit a sick person, he was captured, only to escape through the efforts of a mob of his enraged supporters.²¹ On his way to Wittenberg he stopped in Bremen where he was asked to preach and on November 9, 1522, held the city's first evangelical sermon. From Bremen Zutphen wrote a number of letters to Luther and Probst explaining the situation in Antwerp and his escape, and there he would remain until three years later when he himself was arrested and burned in nearby Heide Dietmarsch.²²

Far from being some far-flung outpost on the periphery of Luther's mental world, then, the city of Antwerp and its Augustinian cloister were well-known quantities. The exchange between Wittenberg and Antwerp had been well-established prior to Luther's arrival on the scene, but the key to the relationship was really the Reformer's close ties to Propst and Zutphen. Throughout the lead-up to the first executions of the Reformation, these men remained in close contact, both via correspondence and their travels to Wittenberg. Moreover the papal nuncio, Aleander, who had a comprehensive view of the situation, had not only called Probst one of the two most important enemies of the church in the Low Countries (Erasmus was the other), but had referred to the Antwerp Augustinian cloister as the »home hearth« (*Hauptherd*) of the Lutheran heresy in the Low Countries.²³ It is no wonder then that one historian has queried »was Antwerp not a ›Wittenberg on the Schelde?‹.«²⁴

But not only did Luther know the Antwerp Augustinians, he also had a pretty clear picture of the individuals who had been charged with silencing

21 Zutphen outlines these events in a letter to Probst and Pater Reiner, both at the time residing in Wittenberg, which may be found in Zutphen's Briefe, hg. v. J. IKEN (BrJ 1, 1885, 241–252), 241–245; and in FREDERICQ (see n. 16), vol. 4, 157–159.

22 On Zutphen's letters to Luther explaining the situation, see RUDLOFF (see n. 10), 199; that Luther responded to Zutphen we know, but that letter is no longer extant. Luther also passed the information along to others, such as his friend Spalatin and to Wenceslaus Link, also a friend as well as the Vicar of the Saxon Augustinian Congregation since 1520 when Staupitz resigned the position. See IKEN, Zutphen's Briefe (see n. 21), 241–252.

23 KALKOFF (see n. 1), vol. 2, 39.52.

24 VERCruysse (see n. 8), 16.

them. Upon his return from the Diet of Worms to the Low Countries in autumn of 1521, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V had established a new, state-run inquisition, naming the Leuven jurist, Frans van der Hulst, as its director. Having witnessed widespread support for Luther among the German princes and laity in Worms, Charles was keen to confront this heresy in his ancestral homelands. A layman, van der Hulst enlisted the help of various ecclesiastics who had already been working to stem the tide of the Reformation in the Low Countries, among them the emperor's father confessor, friar Jean Glapion; the papal nuncio, Jerome Aleander, both recently returned from Worms; the Leuven Professors of theology, Nicholas of Egmond and Jacob Latomus; and the well-known Dominican inquisitor, Jacob van Hoogstraaten of Cologne.

By the time Voes and van den Esschen were executed, Luther had had dealings with many of the men on this list, and had formed some opinion of each of them. He had stood before the emperor in April of 1521, with the result that he was officially declared an outlaw in *Edict of Worms*. At Worms, he also encountered the papal nuncio, Aleander, who had done everything in his power not to allow Luther to come to the Diet, and then to ensure that he simply recant without any discussion once he got there.²⁵ In a letter to a friend, Luther had referred to Glapion as the emperor's »devil,« and Egmond as »most arrogant and most Fransiscan,« demonstrating that he had formed clear opinions of these men.²⁶ The Dominican Inquisitor van Hoogstraaten, well-known for his opposition to Johannes Reuchlin, had denounced Luther's last thesis in the *Leipzig Disputation*, to which Luther responded in a treatise of 1519.²⁷ What is more, a woodcut attributed to Hans Holbein that depicted Luther as *Hercules Germanicus*, holding a kneeling Hoogstraten in his left hand, while raising a spiked club in preparation to strike the Dominican with his right hand had been published in 1522.

25 S. HENDRIX, *Luther and the Papacy*, 1981, 131.

26 »Caesar eum pro sua sapientia inspiratus suo diabolo Glapione Minorita a confessione, superbissimo et minoritissimo monacho, commendavit Morioni illi Egmundensi et aliis sophistis in partibus inferioribus.« Luther to Lang, 26 June, 1522. WAB 2; 565, 18–20.

27 WA 2; 384–387.



Figure 1: Martin Luther, depicted as Hercules Germanicus defeating Occamists, Aristotelians and papists, by Hans Holbein Younger (1497 or 1498–1543), engraving, Switzerland, 16th century / Zentralbibliothek, Zurich, Switzerland / De Agostini Picture Library / Bridgeman Images

As to Latomus, he was a member of theology faculty of Leuven that had condemned Luther on November 7, 1519. But because the faculty had included no explanation of the condemned articles, Latomus took it upon himself to lecture on the issue in 1520, then to write a treatise in 1521 explaining the reasons why those propositions had been selected and condemned.²⁸ Luther's response appeared in September 1521 and addressed both the theological faculty in general, and Latomus specifically.²⁹ Between November 1521 and September 1523, Latomus was deeply involved in the imperial inquisition, which included taking part in the trials of both Probst and Voes and van den Esschen.³⁰ All this is to say that far from being unfamiliar with the enemies of the Antwerp Augustinians, Luther had profound knowledge of these men.³¹

What is more, Luther had seen the evidence of their work in the Low Countries in the years and months prior to the executions of Voes and van den Esschen. Under van der Hulst's direction, the inquisitors had pursued the church's most outspoken critics and by all accounts experienced a great deal of success. Since 1521, Aleander had worked to publish *Edict of Worms* there, while at the same time overseeing a dozen or so book-burnings in major cities, three in Antwerp alone.³² By candidly labeling him a heretic, the inquisitors had been able to pressure Erasmus to leave the Low Coun-

28 JACOB LATOMUS, *Articulorum doctrinae fratris M. Lutheri per theologus Lovanienses damnatorum ratio ex sacris literis et veteribus tractoribus*, Antwerp 1521.

29 The condemnation by the theology faculties of Leuven and Cologne along with Luther's response may be found in WA 6; 170–195. Luther's response to Latomus, entitled *Rationis Latomianae confutatio*, 1521, may be found in WA 8; 36–128.

30 M. GIELIS, *Leuven Theologians as Opponents of Erasmus and of Humanistic Theology* (in: *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus* [Brill's companion to the Christian tradition 9], ed. by E. RUMMEL, 2008, 197–214), 205.

31 Undoubtedly so did many of the reform-minded individuals throughout Europe. In April of 1518, Wilhelm Nesen sent a long and scathing description of the »Magistros Nostros,« the key Leuven theologians, to Ulrich Zwingli. See: *Zwingli's Briefwechsel*, Bd. 1: *Die Briefe von 1510–1522* (CR 94), bearb. v. E. EGLI, hg. v. G. FINSLER, 1911, 378–401; Moreover Erasmus's letters from this period are filled with derogatory remarks about many of these men, especially Egmond. In fact, writes one modern commentator, there is hardly a letter of Erasmus from the period in which he does not complain about that »fanatical monk.« KALKOFF (see n. 1), vol. 1, 75.

32 C.C.G. VISSER, *Luther's geschriften in de Nederlanden tot 1546*, 1969, 13–15.

tries in autumn of 1521, never to return.³³ Spectacular public recantations soon followed. In April 1522, Cornelius Grapheus, the humanist city secretary of Antwerp was forced to openly revoke his views in the city square in Brussels and again a few days later in Antwerp. But, of course, most stunning of all was the fate of Jacob Probst, to which I have already alluded. Having received permission from both pope and emperor to proceed against Probst,³⁴ members of the inquisition questioned the prior in a series of interviews in which he went from overt defiance, to a grudging willingness to admit privately to some errors, to finally a full-scale public recantation, a process that he detailed in his account of the events published in Wittenberg in 1522.³⁵

Then there was the fate of Melchior Miritsch, which further exposed the workings of the inquisitors to Luther, as well as the weakness of his fellow Augustinians. This erstwhile prior of the Reformed German Augustinians in Dresden had been sent in 1520 to the cloister in Ghent to shore up support for the Reformed Augustinians there. In early 1522, just as Probst was being arrested for a second time, Miritsch, too, was picked up and questioned by the inquisition. Because he was able to convince them that he posed no threat to the church, he was released, eventually sending a letter to George Spalatin describing these events. Spalatin passed the letter on to Luther, whose response demonstrates his deep disappointment in Miritsch:

I have read the letter of Miritsch, that most prudent apostate, and as much as I suffer concerning the miserable fall of Jacob [Probst], so much I resent [Miritsch's] most impious sham.³⁶

Sending information from Miritsch's letter on to his friend and fellow Augustinian, Johann Lang, Luther's distress is even more palpable: »Melchior Miritsch did not recant, but he writes that he acts prudently so that he

33 KALKOFF (see n. 1), vol. 2, 35–56.

34 KALKOFF (see n. 1), vol. 2, 57f.

35 JACOB PROBST, *Fratri Jacobi Praepositi Augustiniani quondam Prioris Antuuerpiensis historia vtriusque captivitatis propter verbum Dei*, Wittenberg, 1522. A modern edition may be found in RUDLOFF (see n. 10), 42–65.

36 »Literas mirisschii, prudentissimi apostatê, legi, et, quantum de miserabili lapsu Iacobi doleo, tantum huius fucio impiissimo indignor.« Luther to George Spalatin, April 12, 1522. WAB 2; 493,15–17.

might preserve their favor, that is he worships Satan and pretends to know Christ, charming boaster!«.³⁷ Clearly Luther was deeply disappointed in Miritsch's reluctance to stand up for evangelical ideas. All of this news left Luther with the distinct impression that Satan was exceptionally active in the Low Countries. To Wenceslaus Link, successor to Staupitz as Vicar General of the Reformed German Augustinians, he would write, »For Satan rages powerfully everywhere, but especially in the Low Countries, where power is given to the sophists to rule over us.«³⁸

More information on the methods of the inquisition in the Low Countries as they pertained to the Augustinians soon followed. So vocal had the Antwerp Augustinians been that the emperor's queen-regent in Brabant (Charles had left the Low Countries for Spain in May of 1522), Margaret of Austria, decided to dissolve the Augustinian cloister altogether. On October 6, 1522, just over one week after Zutphen's arrest and escape, she had the remaining friars seized, and on the following day led a procession of the Eucharist out of the cloister church, symbolically demonstrating the heterodoxy of the Augustinians. She would eventually have the cloister destroyed and its church made into a parish church. That Luther was following all of this closely we know because in a letter to Link dated December 19, 1522, he wrote:

The brothers have been expelled from the monastery, some imprisoned in various locations, some let go, having denied Christ, while some have remained steadfast until now. Those who are sons of the city have been scattered in the houses of the Beghards. All of the monastery's goods have been put up for sale, and the church and monastery

37 »Melchior Mirisch non revocavit, sed scribit se prudenter egisse, ut gratiam eorum servaret, hoc est, Satanam adoravit, et Christum simulavit se scire, bellus gloriator!« Luther to Johann Lang, Wittenberg 12 April 1522. WAB 2; 495,21–23. On the same day Luther wrote to his friend the Augustinian Vicar General, Wenceslaus Link, something quite similar about Miritsch. WAB 2; 496.

38 »Satanas enim ubique irascitur fortiter nimis, praesertim in inferioribus partibus terrae, ubi sophistis datum est regnum super nos.« Luther to Johann Lang, 11 June 1522. WAB 2; 559,5–7. Nor was this the first time Luther had connected the activity of the devil with the events in the Low Countries. A month earlier, upon hearing the news of Probst's recantation and Miritsch's actions to avoid arrest, Luther had written: »Satan summis et omnibus viribus nos petit.« Luther to Johann Lang, Wittenberg 12 April 1522. WAB 2; 495,18f.

have been blockaded, eventually to be torn down. With great pomp the Sacrament was transferred to the church of Our Lady, as if out of a heretical place, where it was received honorably by Lady Margaret. Several citizens and women have been harassed and punished.³⁹

All of this information is accurate, for at the time it was Margaret's intention to destroy the church along with the rest of the monastery.⁴⁰ And Luther continued to be updated on the situation. Between October 6, 1522 and July 1, 1523, while the inquisitors interrogated the captive Augustinians, convincing all but three to publicly recant, Zutphen, now in Bremen, was kept informed of the events surrounding the fate of the Antwerp Augustinians, and he passed this information on to Luther and Probst in a series of letters.⁴¹

Clearly the position of the Antwerp Augustinians had been deteriorating for some time. Someone as well-informed and perceptive as Luther must have suspected that it was only a matter of time before someone was burned. Indeed, upon hearing that Probst had been forced to recant in the spring of 1521, Luther had written to Lang prophetically, »This is no longer a joke or a game, but it will now become serious, and it will exact life and

39 »Monasterio expulsi fratres, alii aliis locis captivi, alii negato Christo dimissi, alii adhuc stant fortes, qui autem filii civitatis sunt, in domum Beghardorum sunt detrusi, vendita omnia vasa monasterii, et ecclesia cum monasterio clausa et obstructa, tandem demolenda. Sacramentum cum pompa in Ecclesiam beatae Virginis translatum, tanquam e loco haeretico, susceptum honorifice a Domina Margareta. Cives aliquot et mulieres vexatae et punitae.« Luther to Wenceslaus Link, 19 December 1522. WAB 2; 632,7–13.

40 We know this because on 10 January 1523, the emperor wrote to Margarete, »Et quant à la démolicion que désirez faire dudit cloister et de l'église pour une perpétuelle mémoire du cas y advenu, je suis bien d'aviz, quant en aurez eu le congié de nostre sint père, que les habitacions des religieux soient desmolies en réservant seulement en son entiere l'église pour en faire une paroisse. [...]«. Letter from Charles V to Margaret, January 10, 1523, FREDERICQ (see n. 16), vol. 4, 176.

41 Zutphen himself writes to Probst that a citizen of Bremen brought him news of the events in Antwerp. For Zutphen's letters from this period, see IKEN, Zutphen's Briefe (see n. 21), 241 f. Ortwin Rudloff claims that in December 1522, three letters from Zutphen arrived in Wittenberg, all containing information on the events in Antwerp and Bremen. However only one, Zutphen's letter to Probst mentioned above, has survived.

blood.«⁴² And in fact, for a while after Probst had been recaptured in May of 1522, Luther thought that he, along with two others, had been burned.⁴³

Finally, Luther had a thorough knowledge of the executions themselves, primarily through the eyewitness accounts that were published as pamphlets shortly after the events.⁴⁴ In their descriptions of the deaths, the Reformation-minded authors emphasized four themes.⁴⁵ First, they asserted the corrupt and immoral behavior of the churchmen and inquisitors in charge of the trial. The inquisitors, we are told, were covert in their actions so that no one would know what they were doing until it was too late.⁴⁶ And although they turned out in full regalia for the ritual degradation

42 »Res iam non amplius iocus aut ludus, sed serium erit, et vitam exiget et sanguinem.« Martin Luther to Johann Lange, 12 April 1522. WAB 2; 495,28f.

43 »Iacobus, Prior Antverpiensis, denuo captus est, et praesumitur iam exustus esse, et alii duo cum eo.« Luther to Johann von Staupitz, 27 June, 1522. WAB 2; 567,30–32.

44 The eyewitness accounts include: ANONYMOUS, *Der Actus und handlung/ der degradation und verprennung der Christlichen dreyer Ritter und Merterer, Augustiner or/ dens geschehen zu Brüssel, 1523*; ANONYMOUS, *Historia de Duobus Augustinensibus, ob Evangelij doctrinam exustis Bruxellae, die trigesima Iunii. Anno domini M.D.XXIII. Articuli LXII. per eosdem asserti* (n.p., 1523). This pamphlet was translated with slight alterations and additions into German and published by MARTIN RECKENHOFER, *Dye histori so zwen Augustiner Ordens gemartert seyn tzu Bruxel in Probant von wegen des Evangelij. Dye Artickel darumb sie verbrent seyn mit yrer asßlegung und verklerung*, etc., Erfurt 1523; MARTIN LUTHER, *Ein brief an die Christen ym Nidder land, Wittenberg 1523*, WA 12; 77–80, esp. 79f. Luther's letter is not a firsthand account, but appended to a number of publications of it was the fragment of what purportedly is a letter sent to Luther by an eyewitness to parts of the trial, entitled *Die artickel warumb die zwen Christliche Augustiner münch zů Brussel verprandt sindt*.

45 Brad Gregory's analysis of the pamphlets' themes differs slightly from mine. He sees them as: the linking of the deaths to »evangelical« articles of faith; the likening of the inquisitors to the persecutors of Christ and the broader evocation of parallels with Christ and the apostles; the conviction that suffering was a demonstration of God's love, an exhortation for the faithful to remain true to their beliefs even in death; and a conviction that martyrdoms were a sign that the restoration of God's word had led to a backlash by the anti-Christ, signaling the apocalypse. GREGORY (see n. 1), 145 ff.

46 ANONYMOUS, *Historia de duobus Augustinensibus* (see n. 44), 1. This may well have been the case, for on more than one occasion when the authorities had attempted to move against the Augustinians, crowds gathered to defend them. For example, the following scene was played out when the rumor went around that the Augustinian prior,

and execution of the Augustinians, they avoided the tradition in Brussels of publicly reading the charges against them »out of shame for the great injustice that was perpetrated.«⁴⁷ Most telling, remarks one author, was the fact that the inquisitors viciously slandered the men by claiming that at the last moment they had recanted, were converted by a miracle of the Virgin Mary, and died in the arms of the church. But, writes one author, »everyone who stood next to the fire rejects and denies this. So it would be much better and smarter if they would refrain from such lies.«⁴⁸ So, the churchmen are portrayed as pompous, brazen, deceitful, and corrupt.

The second common feature of these pamphlets was that the two Augustinians were presented as Christ figures.⁴⁹ One author wrote that, »some say that [the younger Augustinian] insisted he would be obedient unto death,«⁵⁰ echoing the words of St. Paul who described Christ as »obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.«⁵¹ Two of the accounts men-

Hendrik von Zutphen, who was under house arrest, was going to be tried: »[...] op Sinte Michielsdach, doen was t'Antwerpen een groot rumoer van quade Wyffs der causen van eenen Augusteynschen Predicant, die in de munte quam, ende die Marckgrave leyden hem gevangen in Sinte Michiels Clooster, in een camer; hier door was een groot rumoer, soo dat er wel drie hondert Vrouwen quamen, ende deden op die camer groot gewelt, soo dat sy hem vuyt cregen, ende leyden hem in syn Clooster, des anderen daechs ginck hy oock naer Martinus Luyter toe.« F.G. ULLENS, *Antwerpsch Chronykje*, in het welk zeer veele en elders te vergeefs gezogte geschiedenissen, sedert den jare 1500 tot het jaar 1574, ed. by P. VANDER EYK, 1743, 20. See also H. VON DER PLANITZ, *Berichte aus dem Reichsregiment in Nürnberg*, 1521–1523, ed. by E. WÜLKER / H. VIRCK, 1899, 60.

47 »auss scham der grossen ungerechtigeyt unterlassen«. ANONYMOUS, *Die artickel* (see n. 44), WA 12; 80,9.

48 »Aber solches verneinen und widersprechen/ alle die/ so zum nechsten bei idem Feür gestanden seind/ darumb wer es ihnen vil wager unnd besser/ sie geschwigen solcher Lugen gar.« RECKENHOFER (see n. 44), 4.

49 It was during this period that we see Luther's integration of the Biblical narrative with his own experiences, particularly as seen through his application of St. Paul's language to himself. It seems that Luther was open to seeing the same in other situations and individuals as well. See T. WENGERT, *Martin Luther's Movement toward an Apostolic Self-awareness as Reflected in his Early Letters* (LuJ 61, 1994, 71–92).

50 »Etliche sagen/ das er auch gesagt habe/ er wolle gehorsam sein biß zum tode.« RECKENHOFER (see n. 44), 2.

51 Ph 2:6–8. Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

tioned that when the father confessors, endeavoring to convince the men to recant, began to weep, the condemned friars responded that they should not cry on their account, but on account of their own sins,⁵² an echo of Christ's words on the way to the cross, »Daughters of Jerusalem, don't weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.«⁵³ Another author noted that the Augustinians were handed over to the temporal authorities for execution, »as Christ was given over to the heathens by the Jews.«⁵⁴ And when one of the inquisitors told the condemned friars that he had the power to execute them, they answered, »These are the words of Pilate, and you would have no power over men unless it were given you from above,«⁵⁵ which is the precise answer Jesus gave Pontius Pilate.⁵⁶ Clearly these eyewitnesses associated this event with the biblical account of the trial and execution of Jesus.

The extraordinary demeanor of the two men, exemplified by their repeated articulations of their willingness and even happiness to die was a third theme found in these firsthand accounts. The friars, we are told, »praised God that he had given them the grace to die for his word,«⁵⁷ and »went to the fire joyfully smiling.«⁵⁸ Furthermore, »they thanked God that they could die for his word. And they suffered such innocent martyrdom

52 »Wie man sie nun also furet/ unnd sie zum feuer kommen/ habe gemeldte vier Beichvätter geweynet/ darauff die zwen gesagt/ sie dörffen umb sie nit weinen/ sondern über ihre Sünde/ und über das groß unrecht/ dieweil sie die Göttliche Gerechtigkeit also verfolgeten.« RECKENHOFER (see n. 44), 3; »Als sie nun zum fewr komen sein/ haben die vier Beichtvetter geweynet/ da haben diße zwen gesagt/ sie dürffen nitt umb sy weynen/ sonder über ire sund/ Sagten weiter/ weynnet über das groß unrecht/ so ir die Gottliche gerechtigkeit also vervolgt.« ANONYMOUS, Actus und Handlung (see n. 44), 3f.

53 Lk 23:28.

54 »wie Christus durch die Juden den heyden«. ANONYMOUS, Die artickel (see n. 44), WA 12; 80,4f.

55 »das sind die wort Pylati, und du hettest keynen gewallt über mich, wer er dyr nicht von oben herab gegeben«. ANONYMOUS, Die artickel (see n. 44), WA 12; 80,14f.

56 »You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.« Jn 19:10f.

57 »[...] lobten Got/ daß er inen die gnad geben het/ umb seines worts willen zu sterben.« ANONYMOUS, Actus und Handlung (see n. 44), 3.

58 »[...] gantz frolich mit lachendem mund ins feuwr gegangen.« ANONYMOUS, Actus und Handlung (see n. 44), 3.

and death willingly, eagerly, happily and steadfastly.«⁵⁹ In the fire, wrote one author,

they never became cowardly, rather (as you could see in their gestures, faces, and eyes) the longer it went on, the more steadfast and courageous they became. And most extraordinary, you could see on them a wonderful happiness, so that many even thought that they were smiling.⁶⁰

The strong inference here is that human beings, relying on their own powers, could not have been this courageous, so that hand of God must have been at work.

The fourth theme that runs through these accounts was the Augustinians' defiance of the church, particularly their criticism of ecclesiastical authority demonstrated most clearly in the sixty-two articles for which they were executed.⁶¹ Although heavily influenced by Luther's ideas, these articles have little to do with his notions of justification. Rather, they censure the papacy for prohibiting Luther's books, limit the power of bishops and the pope to the ministry of the word, insist that all men are priests before God, and that all men and even women with an understanding of the Gospel may remit sins. They eliminate the priests' exceptional status in the consecration of the Eucharistic elements, and reduce the number of sacraments to three, while championing the right of the laity to receive communion in both kinds. The central critique in each of these assertions is that the church has overstepped its authority. Moreover, when the confessors attending Voes and van den Esschen asked them if they remained hardened in their denial of true faith they replied: »We

59 »unnd beyde offentlich gesagt, Sie dancken Gott, das sie umb seynes wortts willen sterben sollen. Und solche unschuldige marter unnd todt nicht alleyn williglich, begyrig, frölich und bestendiglich gelitten [...]«. ANONYMOUS, Die artickel (see n. 44), WA 12; 80,15–18.

60 »[...] seind sie doch nicht kleinmütig worden/ sonder (so man auß ihren Geberden/ Angesicht und Augen urtheilen will) seind sie je lenger je getröster/ bestendiger und müti-ger worden. Insonderheit ward an ihnen gesehen ein wunderbarliche fröligkeit/ also das vil vermeinten/ sie lachten.« RECKENHOFER (see n. 44), 3.

61 These sixty two articles were included in ANONYMOUS, *Historia de duobus Augustinensibus* (see n. 44), 6–12, under the title »Articuli Asserti per fratrem Henricum, etc.«

believe in God and in a Christian church, but we do not believe in your church.«⁶²

In addition to presenting these major themes, the eyewitness accounts also made a variety of other factors clear that would impinge upon Luther's thinking about the event. First there are the actions of the third Augustinians, Lambert Thorn who was also degraded on 1 July 1523, but requested time to reconsider his views and immediately received a stay of execution.⁶³ Of the three friars, Thorn appears to have been the most senior and to have had the most spiritual influence, as one early historian of these events refers to him as the prior who succeeded Zutphen, although we cannot confirm this, while Luther calls him the successor to Probst *in words*.⁶⁴ The other two, Voës and van den Esschen, about whom almost nothing is known, refused to recant and were burned.⁶⁵

62 »Wir glauben in Gott auch in ein Cristliche Kirch. Aber euwer kirchen glauben wir nit.« ANONYMOUS, *Actus und Handlung* (see n. 44), 3.

63 Thorn would live out his life in captivity, dying in 1528. In January of 1524, Luther would write a letter of consolation to him. See Luther to Lambert Thorn, 19 January 1524. WAB 3; 237–239.

64 JEAN DIERCXENS, *Antverpia Christo Nascens et crescens seu Acta Ecclessiam Antverpiensem ejusque Apostolos ac Viros pietate conspicuous concernentia usque ad speculum XVIII*, v. 3 1461–1522, Antwerp 1773, 376; Luther to George Spalatin, 22 or 23 July 1523. WAB 3; 115.

65 Van den Esschen is first referred to in the sources at the founding of the Augustinian cloister in Antwerp in 1513 where his name appears on the register of the original seven brothers at that cloister. CLEMEN, *Die Ersten Märtyrer des evangelischen Glaubens* (see n. 1), 308; the next reference by name to either of them does not appear in the sources until their deaths, where Jan Pascha, one of the inquisitors writes that the three Augustinians were Henricus Vos from s'Hertogenbosch, Johannes vanden Esschen, and Lambertus de Thoren. FREDERICQ (see n. 16), vol. 4, 205. In a letter to Spalatin composed immediately after news of the executions arrived in Wittenberg, Luther claims that van Esschen was not yet thirty years old. Luther to George Spalatin, 22 or 23 July, 1523. WAB 3; 115. Writing in the second half of the sixteenth century, the churchman and historian, Cyriakus Spangenberg claims that the two men spent some time at the St. Anne's Augustinian cloister in Eisleben before going on to Antwerp to live under the Prior Jacob Probst. However, this assertion has not been confirmed anywhere else. C. SPANGENBERG, *Mansfeldische Chronica* (*Mansfelder Blätter* 31–32), 1918, 341. These references constitute the entirety of the extant biographical information on these two men.

A second rather obvious but still noteworthy observation regarding the situation in Antwerp that would impact Luther's reaction is that Voes and van den Esschen could easily have saved their own lives, because at this time the inquisition was less interested in burning heretics than in having them publicly recant.⁶⁶ In other words, simple eradication of the Augustinians was not the goal as it would become later in the century with the Anabapists, nor was burning a few upstarts in order to make a point, a tactic for which the papal legate Aleander had lobbied but which had been rejected by the emperor.⁶⁷ In fact, any flicker of doubt on the part of the men would likely have led to a stay of execution, as the response to Thorn's request demonstrated.

It is also worth noting that during the ritual degradation and lead-up to the execution of Voes and van den Esschen, every effort was made not to burn them, but rather to convince them to change their minds. Months of conversations and interrogations had occurred, characterized by both threats and promises, which had convinced fifteen of their captive brethren to recant. And even when the decision to execute them was finally made, the actual process was drawn out, taking four hours to complete and allowing them every opportunity to reconsider.⁶⁸ Moreover, for their ritual degradations, the men were split into two groups: first Heinrich Voes, the youngest of the three, was relieved of his priestly status in a ceremony that lasted about an hour, then van den Esschen and Thorne experienced the same ritual.⁶⁹ It seems likely that by splitting them up, the inquisitors hoped some or all might reconsider. After their degradation, they were led to the stake accompanied by four confessors who pleaded with them to recant.⁷⁰ Once at

66 Various scholars have made this point. See GREGORY (see n. 1), 145; RUDLOFF (see n. 10), 199; KALKOFF (see n. 1), vol. 2, 80f.

67 Aleander to Vice Chancellor de Medici, Brussels, 2 Sept. 1521, in: Aleander und Luther (see n. 13), 263; and KALKOFF (see n. 1), vol. 2, 62.

68 »Diser Actus hatt bey vier stundt gewertt.« ANONYMOUS, Actus und Handlung (see n. 44), 3.

69 ANONYMOUS, Historia de duobus Augustinensibus (see n. 44), 2.

70 »[...] seind vier Beichtveter mit inen gangen/ [...] / diße vier seind neben inen gangen/ inen vil zu gereth/ sie sollens widderruffen/ Sagten sie und lobten Got/ daß er inen die gnad geben het/ umb seines worts willen zu sterben. Als sie nun zum fewr komen sein/ haben die vier Beichtveter geweynet/ da haben diße zwen gesagt/ sie dürffen nitt umb sy

the stake, they were left standing there for a long time before the fires were ignited, as one eyewitness reports, undoubtedly in order to be given time to change their minds.⁷¹ Finally, when the fires were lit, they began to burn very slowly, prompting one eyewitness to remark that it was unclear whether this happened by chance or on purpose.⁷² All of these measures seem designed not to secure their swift execution, but rather to convince them to question their own convictions. In their decision to die, and even more so, in their steadfast adherence to that decision, an unshakable commitment to their beliefs was on full display. And via personal contacts and the eyewitness accounts, it is safe to say that Luther had an intimate knowledge of the situation of the Antwerp Augustinians and the events surrounding their deaths.

II *Luther's Response*

But while Luther must have had some sense of *when* and the *where* the first individuals might be executed for their beliefs during the Reformation, it was *who* was to suffer death and *how* they were to go to their deaths that surprised him. For after his initial outburst that he thought he would be first to die for the Gospel, it was just such unexpected aspects of the story that most influenced his reaction and informed his interpretation of the event.⁷³ In the days after he first heard the news, Luther would refer to the executions in a series of letters,⁷⁴ but it was his ballad, »A New Song« and to

weynen/ sonder uber ire sund/ Sagten weiter/ weynnet uber das groß unrecht/ so ir die Gottliche gerechtigkeit also vervolgt.« ANONYMOUS, *Actus und Handlung* (see n. 44), 3.

71 »Iam vestivus nudati, relicto tantum idusio, steteri dui, magis ipso palos amplectentes, quam alligati.« ANONYMOUS, *Historia de duobus Augustinensibus* (see n. 44), 3.

72 »Ignis lentius succendabatur; id consilio factu sit an casu, equidem affirmare non ausim.« ANONYMOUS, *Historia de duobus Augustinensibus* (see n. 44), 3.

73 And this was not the first time Luther connected the events in the Low Countries to what he thought was his own imminent execution. Karel Rose, an Augustinian in Nuremberg, commenting on the arrival of Probst there in September 1522, claims that when Luther heard from Probst about his difficulties in the Low Countries he replied: »Wen solche flammen aus dem feuer fligen, so wirdt ich noch lang nicht verprent.« Karel van Rose to Nicolaas van Kniebys, September, 1522. FREDERICQ (see n. 16), vol. 4, 136.

74 See WAB 3; 114–116; WAB 3; 116f; and WA 12; 68–72.

a lesser degree his *Open Letter to the Christians in the Low Countries* that reveal his impression that the Reformation had entered an entirely new phase.⁷⁵ Something new was happening, something that required expression in song. An analysis of his ballad in particular demonstrates Luther's understanding of those new things and reveals how he was inspired by Scripture to put it down in song.

For many historians, Luther's »A New Song« falls outside the parameters of his hymn writing in a variety of ways. It predated his »initial« outpouring of hymns in 1523–1524, which came as a pointed response to the radical Thomas Müntzer's efforts in this area.⁷⁶ Most of Luther's hymns consist of the transposition of a section of Scripture or the catechism into music or were based upon medieval Latin or German precedents. »A New Song« is not. It is his only composition that employs the musical form of a ballad.⁷⁷ And it is his only song about a contemporary event, causing one historian to describe its focus »not on sacred material, or even immediately on the Word as such, but on a historical, highly politicized event in distant Brussels.«⁷⁸ In short, it has been called something of an enigma.⁷⁹ And many historians therefore emphasize Luther's summary of a political event, and his attempt to broadcast it using a musical form commonly employed at the time for publicizing news quickly and widely. The result of this assessment is that Luther's political savvy is accentuated, as is his ability to deftly use this event and the media in the service of his cause.⁸⁰ In coming to this conclusion, most scholars have focused predominately on two of the

75 LUTHER, Ein brief an die Christen (see n. 44), WA 12; 77–79; The song has been translated into English multiple times. The translation employed here is from U.S. LEUPOLD (ed.), LW 53: Liturgy and Hymns, 1965, 214–216.

76 In 1523, Thomas Müntzer had made some initial attempts at writing lyrics and music. Realizing, it seems, that if no one responded the people might very well be seduced by Müntzer, Luther called on his colleagues to write hymns then answered the call himself with a tremendous outpouring of compositions. P. VEIT, *Das Kirchenlied in der Reformation Martin Luthers. Eine thematische und semantische Untersuchung*, 1986, 36–40.

77 Although one might argue that *Dear Christians one and all Rejoice*, his second hymn, shares many of the characteristics of this form.

78 CASEY (see n. 5), 79.

79 RÖSSLER (see n. 5), 221.

80 See note 6.

ballad's three chief elements: the recounting of event itself, and the musical genre employed by Luther.⁸¹

But to truly understand the work's stimulus and meaning it is necessary to include the third element of the song, namely its scriptural inspiration, which, once comprehended, helps clarify what surprised or impressed Luther about the executions of Voes and van den Esschen. For far from being merely a polemical statement articulated in a well-established secular genre, the ballad is in fact, very much biblically grounded, its scriptural elements not a mere afterthought, but central to its inspiration and essential to its framework.

To begin with, it seems unlikely that Luther, who had lectured on the psalms and undoubtedly knew them by heart, could write the words, »A New Song Here Shall Be Begun« without thinking of »O sing unto the Lord a new song,« the opening line of psalms 96 and 98. And indeed an analysis of the ballad in light of the Psalms, particularly psalm 98, reveals Luther's work to be a response to the Psalm that employs the events in Brussels as its material. For although it is well known that Luther understood the Psalms as testifying to Christ and his works, he also believed that they attested to »all of Christ,« meaning the Lord and His church.⁸² In the case of Psalm 98, this would mean that the marvelous works of the Lord are connected to and even synonymous with the works of His church. Clearly Voes and van den

81 As has long been noted, the mere fact that Luther chose to publicize this event, coupled with his use of a contemporary musical form, the *Zeitungslied* (news event song), itself designed to spread news broadly, quickly, and in black-and-white terms, is clear proof of the polemical nature of the song. My point is not to dispute this interpretation, but to balance it against what might be referred to as the song's more biblical inspirations. For discussions of the song's form as it fits into the genre of the *Zeitungslied* see RÖSSLER (see n. 5), esp. 217–221; and CASEY (see n. 5), 76f.83f.

82 WA 3; 167,20–28. Multiple authors have addressed Luther's understanding of the Psalms, particularly his conviction that the Psalms refer to Christ. A few works to orient the reader include: E. VOGELSANG, *Die Anfänge von Luthers Christologie nach der Ersten Psalmenvorlesung, insbesondere in ihren exegetischen und systematischen Zusammenhängen mit Augustin und der Scholastik dargestellt*, 1929; G. EBELING, *Luthers Psalterdruck vom Jahre 1513* (1953) (in: DERS., *Lutherstudien* Bd. 1, 1971, 69–131); H.A. OBERMAN, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. E. Walliser-Schwarzbart, 1989, 250–254; and B. LOHSE, *Martin Luther's Theology, Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. R.A Harrisville, 1999, 51–67.

Esschen, who Luther referred to as »saints of God« in the ballad, and who are described in the pamphlets as Christ figures, are members of that church. This discovery helps us to see this song for what it is, not primarily as a piece of political propaganda couched in religious terms, but as certitude for Luther that God through his church was at work in a miraculous way, something that required Christians to sing. It further highlights what Luther found so new and spectacular about the events of July 1, 1523 in Brussels. And finally, it offers a new understanding of what Luther, himself, thought the Reformation was.

Psalm 98 begins with the imperative, »O sing unto the Lord a new song.« But what is the impetus to sing? What conditions have presented themselves that call for not just song, but a new song? For the Psalmist the answer is fivefold: first, because God »has done marvelous things;« second, more specifically »his right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory;« third, »he has made known his victory« and »revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations;« fourth, »he has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness;« and fifth, »For he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity.« As a result of these divine actions, the Psalmist encourages »all the earth« to »make a joyful noise to the Lord,« and »break forth into joyous song and sing praises,« with lyre and horn accompanying. Moreover not just humanity, but all creation is invoked in this chorus: »Let the sea roar,« »Let the floods clap their hands,« »Let the hills sing together for joy.« Luther chose to write about the events of July 1, 1523 in Brussels because he saw in them the hand of God, and an exceptionally vivid fulfillment of the criteria set forth in the Psalm. Thus Luther's first line, »A new song here shall be begun,« may be seen as a direct response to the Psalmist's imperative: »O sing unto the Lord a new Song.«

The subject of the ballad is not, then, the story of the executions *per se*, but a presentation of those executions as a miracle of God or the »marvelous things« ascribed to him by the Psalmist. In his own translation of psalm 98, Luther used the phrase »does miracles« (*thut Wunder*) to describe God's actions, literally »O sing unto the Lord a new song for he has done miracles.« In the ballad, he employs the same term to describe God's actions in Brussels, namely »what God himself has done« (*was Gott hat gethan*), and what he has done is to »show the wonders of his hands« or translated more

literally, »he has made his miraculous power known« (*Hat er sein Wunder macht bekannt*). Thus the active agent in these events is God and the action he performs is a miracle. However, God does his work »by two boys, martyrs youthful [...] whom he with favor truthful, so richly hath adorned« (*durch zween junge Knaben [...] die er mit seinen Gaben so reichlich hat gezieret*), and this is where the power and work of God intersected the events in Brussels, where the Psalms which testify of Christ also attest to the actions of his church. We see the same description of the events as miraculous when Luther writes to the citizens of the Low Countries: »Therefore my dearest friends, be comforted and joyful in Christ, and let us be thankful for his great signs and wonders, which he has begun to work among us.«⁸³

What is so surprising to Luther, it seems, is the vehicles God has chosen to demonstrate his power and their steadfast demeanor. Prior to these executions, all of Voes and van den Esschen's more senior colleagues had demurred in the face of possible martyrdom: Probst had been broken; Miritsch had talked his way out of trouble; Zutphen had escaped; and Lambert Thorn had decided to »reconsider.« Yet these two unknown »boys« (*junge Knaben*) had courageously gone to their deaths. In verses three, four, six, and seven Luther recounted the various unsuccessful attempts by the theological faculty at Leuven to convince Voes and van den Esschen to recant. When the fires were finally lit, writes Luther, »Great wonder seized on every man, For with contempt they [the friars] view them [the fires]« (*Es nahm gross Wunder Jedermann, Dass sie solch' Pein veracht'ten*). He continues, »To all with joy they yielded quite, With singing and God-praising« (*Mit Freuden sie sich gaben drein, Mit Gottes Lob und Singen*). It is these actions in particular that Luther sees as novel, for he refers to them as »new things« (*neuen dyngen*). Thus the seemingly asymmetrical power held by each side – the advanced degrees of the members of the theological faculty, the inquisitors who represented the pope and emperor,⁸⁴ against the convic-

83 »Darumb, meyn aller liebsten, seyt getrost und frolich ynn Christo, und last uns dancken seynen grossen zeichen und wundern, so er angefangen hat unter uns zu thun.« LUTHER, Ein brief an die Christen (see n. 44), WA 12; 78,22–24.

84 In November, 1521, Charles V had named van der Hulst head of his new secularly-run inquisition; on June 1, 1523, pope Adrian VI had also named him a papal inquisitor.

tions of two mere youths indicates that God must be at work.⁸⁵ So the marvelous deeds of God referred to in the Psalm are given a concrete form by Luther in the unexpected steadfastness of the young friars in Brussels.

Next the Psalmist defines in greater detail the works of God that should give rise to song, namely »his right hand and his holy arm have gotten him the victory.« References to a victory necessarily assume an enemy or opponent and some sort of contest, both of which Luther introduces in stanza three. The opponent, learns the reader, is »the old fiend« (*Der alte Feind*), the designation for Satan found in Mt 13:39. But like God, he acts through his earthly agents, the inquisitors and the »sophists« from the University of Leuven. In fact, Luther conflates Satan and the inquisitors into one, repeatedly using the term »old fiend« to refer to all of them together in what might be seen as the opposite and evil counterpart to his fusion of Christ with his church. This »Satan,« then, »gather[s] [the Sophists] to the game« (*versammelt er zu diesem Spiel*). In stanza three Luther also foreshadows the outcome of the tilt, again demonstrating God's agency literally: »The Spirit [of God] fools doth make [of the Sophists] – They could get nothing by it.« (*Der Geist sie macht zu Thoren, Sie konnten nichts gewinnen*). Throughout the ballad, the devil reappears occasionally, again amalgamated with his subordinates. In verse four, he chafes because the men, referred to here as »youngsters« (*jungen*) refuse to recant.⁸⁶ In verse ten he hopes that by executing the men, he can silence them. But the very ashes of the men shame and disgrace him (*Sie macht den Feind zu Schanden*), with the result that he is forced to allow the story to be told in every land. So the

85 I am not the first to make this point. Robert Kolb has argued convincingly that Luther's key realization in this and other martyrdoms was that in such an asymmetrical power relationship, God reveals himself when the seemingly weaker and defeated party comes out the winner. Kolb attributes this observation of Luther to the Reformer's broader »theology of the cross,« a theology of paradox which equates God's wisdom with what seems like foolishness and God's power with what seems like impotence.« KOLB (see n. 5), 401. (Theologically speaking, one might also see this as God working *sub contrario*, hiding his power behind what appears to be weakness and foolishness.) And Martin Rössler has put what most impressed Luther about the case succinctly: »In der offensichtlichen Ohnmacht der Bekenner zeigt Gott seine Macht.« RÖSSLER (see n. 5), 221.

86 »Den alten Feind das sehr verdross, Das er war überwunden von solchen Jungen, er so gross; Er ward vol Zorn von Stunden.«

victory referred to in general by the Psalmist is given specific expression in the outcome of the events in Brussels, which constitute a showdown between God and the devil. And it is worth remembering here that Luther saw the devil as exceptionally active in the Low Countries during this period.

The author of the psalm further enjoins the reader to sing in response to the fact that that God »has made known his victory« and has »revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.« Already in stanza one of the song, Luther underscores the point that God has »showed the wonders of his hands« or put more literally, »he has made his miraculous power known« (*Hat er sein Wunder macht bekant*). Without the Psalm as his inspiration, this phrase makes little sense, for it would be more pointed just to say, »God has done a miracle.« But the Psalm and Luther in his ballad both emphasize not just the miracle, but the openness of the deed – that God has publicized his miracle as if it were an object lesson. In verse eight Luther underscores the public nature of the event when he writes that »Great wonder seized on every man« (*Es nahm gross Wunder Jedermann*) at the steadfastness of the friars as they faced the fire. This short phrase reveals that there was an audience, and that the burnings were held in a public forum, a point Luther made repeatedly in his correspondence regarding the event.⁸⁷ And in verse eight, Luther returns to this idea that God reveals or makes his miracle known, writing that the Sophists' courage melted before these new things »that God was thus revealing« (*da sych Gott liess so mercken*). In verses nine and ten Luther further addresses God's role in the spreading of the news about the event, insisting that the Holy Spirit, through the blood and ashes of the men, bears witness to the executions everywhere: »The Spirit cannot silent be: Good Abel's blood out-poured, Must still besmear Cain's forehead.« (*Doch kan der geyst nicht schweygen hie: des Habels blut vergossen, es mus den Kain melden*). Luther develops the thought further in stanza ten where the ashes of the dead announce the crime everywhere:

87 »Facta est hęc res Brusselle in publico foro.« Luther to George Spalatin, 22 or 23 July 1523. WAB 3; 115, 13f; »Ex Flandria bona accepimus nuncia, esse duos ex nostris fratribus pro verbo dei exustos Brusselle in foro publico spectaculo«. Luther to Jacob Montanus, 26 July 1523. WAB 3; 117,9–11.

»Leave off their ashes never will, into all lands they scatter.« (*Die Aschen will nicht lassen ab, Sie stäubt in allen Landen*). It seems worth repeating that the emphasis is not only on the events themselves, but equally on the fact that God publicizes his victory.

Moreover, in response to the psalmist's urging to »Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth,« Luther introduces a great chorus from everywhere that joins the voices of the men who, although dead, continue to sing. In verse ten, Luther describes how the devil, who had attempted to silence the men with death, must »allow them to sing very joyfully« »in every land« and »in tongues of every people« (*Gar frohlich lassen singen*), (*an allem Ort*), and (*mit aller stym und zungen*). It is as though the men, who themselves sang as the fire burned around them as one eyewitness account indicates, raised a new song that now is joined by a chorus of people all over the earth.⁸⁸

Having encouraged the people of the earth to praise God, the psalmist then enjoins nature to join the chorus: »Let the sea roar, and all that fills it [...] Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy.« In the final stanzas of the ballad, Luther picks up on this notion that nature itself joins the new song in two ways. First, nature refuses to engage in the cover-up of the executions, thereby helping to declare them. No »stream, hole, ditch, grave,« (*Die hilft keyn bach, loch, grub noch grab*) says Luther, will hide the ashes of the departed. But more importantly, in the final verse, nature itself sings the new song by changing from winter into summer, and by bringing forth tender flowers. (*Der Sommer yst hart fur der thur, der winter yst vergangen; die zarten blumen gehn erfur.*) This vision, which has its origins in *Song of Songs*, acts as a metaphor for the impact of the re-emergent Gospel, not unlike the flowers that often bloom under the manger in medieval depictions of the nativity.⁸⁹ But it also provides an example of nature praising God. What better way is there for nature to

88 ANONYMOUS, *Historia de duobus Augustinensibus* (see n. 44), 3.

89 Sg 2:11f, »For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in the land.« Luther also refers to these verses in *Ein Brief an die Christen im Niederland*, when he writes »Aber nu ist die zeyt widder komen, das wir der dordel tauben stym hören und die blumen auffgehen ynn unserm land.« WA 12; 77,10–12.

declare the great works of God than to break forth into renewed life and growth?

Much ink has been spilt about the song's final couplet and its relationship to this vision of springtime: »His hand when once extended, withdraws not till he's finished.« One translation renders it as a positive prognostication for the future, a happy ending: »And He who winter banished, will send a happy summer.«⁹⁰ But Luther's German is more ambivalent. Literally translated, the couplet means: »He who has begun this will bring it to a successful conclusion« (*Der das hat angefangen, der wirt es wol volenden*). But what does Luther have in mind here? What is this successful conclusion?⁹¹ The psalm offers some insight. With all creation having rejoiced before the Lord, the psalmist ends his work by articulating to the reader that the marvelous works of God are merely a prelude to his return: »For he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.«⁹² The progression of Luther's thought follows the same steps: nature praises God, not because He brings better days, but because he will conclude these events, and for Luther a successful conclusion means that God comes to judge the world.⁹³ In his *Open Letter to the Christians in the Netherlands*, Luther underscores this message by juxtaposing the decisions of the inquisitors with the judgments of

90 John A. Messenger's translation, c. 1840; Rössler sees it as a rather vague foreshadowing of »eternal summer« or the last day. RÖSSLER (see n. 5), 228.

91 Dick Akerboom and Marcel Gielis argue that the ending to the song draws its inspiration solely from Sg 2:1 If, the image of winter changing to spring. But this interpretation does little to explain the song's very last line, »Der das hat angefangen, der wirt es wol volenden.« My argument is simply that to understand the final couplet we must look to the Psalm. See AKERBOOM / GIELIS (see n. 1), 265.

92 Psalm 96 ends similarly: »For he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He shall judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.«.

93 Reference to the aptness of van den Esschen's first name, Johann, may very well be further evidence of Luther's eschatological understanding of the event. In verse two he writes that »The first [Augustinian] right fitly John was named« (*Der erst recht wol Johannes heißt*), which Paul Casey takes as a reference to John the Baptist, the martyred forerunner of Jesus. CASEY (see n. 5), 84. Rössler, however, interprets Luther's words to refer to the actual meaning of the name »John,« which is »God is merciful.« RÖSSLER (see n. 5), 221. It is impossible to ascertain whose interpretation is correct, as both are apt.

God when he writes, »But our judge is not far off, and he will offer another judgment. We know this and it is certain.«⁹⁴

III Conclusion

One purpose of this essay was to answer the questions, why did the first executions of the Reformation, which to someone with Luther's knowledge of the situation should have come as no surprise, make such a significant impression on Luther, and what was the nature of that impression? The simple answer is that in them he did not see the obvious and inevitable outcome of a struggle in which two sides were unwilling to compromise, but rather a striking example of the hand of God at work. What stunned him most was not that the inquisitors in Brussels executed someone for the sake of the Gospel, but rather the identity and steadfastness of their victims, two young, seemingly vulnerable friars; men who had lost not one, but two forceful and committed leaders in Probst and Zutphen, both of whom had fled the inquisition, one of whom, not before he had had publicly recanted; men who had watched the prior in the nearby Ghent cloister, Melchior Miritsch, talk his way out of arrest by the inquisition; men who had experienced all but three of their cohort recant and had seen the third of their small number, Lambert Thorn – the one of them seemingly best equipped to stand up to the inquisition – ask for time to reconsider and be spared; men who could easily have saved their own lives; and men who were up against some of their age's most intimidating representatives of the emperor and pope. If these two seemingly unremarkable young men could succeed where so many others who outwardly appeared more formidable had failed, and with such resolve and courage, then God must have been at work! This was for Luther indeed a miracle. Responding to the urging of the Psalmist that the observation of such an event should elicit song among God's people, Luther wrote a song, a new song about the new works of God, for what looked like a stunning defeat in human terms was to Luther's mind a marvelous victory on the level of the divine.

94 »Aber unser richter ist nicht ferne, der wirt eyne ander urteyl fellen, das wissen wir, und sinds gewiss.« LUTHER, Ein brief an die Christen (see n. 44), WA 12; 79,7f.

But we also raised the question about what Luther's reaction indicates about how he viewed the Reformation at this early stage. Heiko Oberman has argued that for Luther, the Reformation was not an effort to improve people's behavior thereby improving the society and the world; nor was it even in its essence an effort to purify the theology of the late medieval church in order to improve people's understanding of salvation and how it worked. It was a preaching of the Gospel with a full expectation of the consequences:

The only progress [Luther] expected from the reformation was the Devil's rage, provoked by the rediscovery of the Gospel. The adversary would hurl himself at the Church with increased force, attacking from all sides, and by all possible means. Before there could be consummation there would be intensified persecution. [...] God himself would bring about reformation through consummation; it would be preceded by the Devil's counter-reformation.⁹⁵

When Luther saw how these two men were executed, he was convinced that the Gospel having been proclaimed, Satan had begun his assault of the church. But more importantly, in the unexpected steadfastness and martyrdom of these two men, which he referred to as »new things,« Luther saw that God had been roused to his own Reformation. And it is to this Reformation that Luther referred when he wrote to Spalatin, »Thanks be to Christ, who has finally begun to let my, nay rather his, words bear fruit.«

95 OBERMAN (see n. 82), 267. Oberman argues that Luther's ballad demonstrates his conviction that the executions were a new chapter in the eschatological battle between God and Satan that had gone on since the beginning of time, the renewed ferocity of which now signaled that the end was near.

Appendix: A New Song Here Shall Be Begun

1. A new song here shall be begun – ⁹⁶ The Lord God help our singing! Of what our God himself hath done, Praise, honor to him bringing. At Brussels in the Netherlands By two boys, martyrs youthful He showed the wonders of his hands, Whom he with favor truthful So richly hath adorned. 2. The first right fitly John was named, So rich he in God's favor; His brother, Henry – one unblamed, Whose salt lost not its savor. From this world they are gone away, The diadem they've gained; Honest, like God's good children, they For his word life disdained, And have become his martyrs. 3. The old arch-fiend did them immure With terrors did enwrap them. He bade them God's dear Word abjure, with cunning he would trap them: From Louvain many sophists came, In their curst nets to take them, By him are gathered to the game: The Spirit fools doth make them – They could get nothing by it. 4. Oh! they sang sweet, and they sang sour; Oh! they tried every double; The boys they stood firm as a tower, And mocked the sophists' trouble. The ancient foe it filled with hate That he was thus defeated By two such youngsters – he, so great! His wrath grew sevenfold heated, He laid his plans to burn them.	5. Their cloister garments off they tore, Took off their consecrations; All this the boys were ready for, They said Amen with patience. To God their Father they gave thanks That they would soon be rescued From Satan's scoffs and mumming pranks, With which, in falsehood masked, The world he so befooled. 6. Then gracious God did grant to them To pass true priesthood's border, And offer up themselves to him, And enter Christ's own order, Unto the world to die outright, With falsehood made a schism, And come to heaven all pure and white, To monkery be the besom, And leave men's toys behind them. 7. They wrote for them a paper small, And made them read it over; The parts they showed them therein all Which their belief did cover. Their greatest fault was saying this: »In God we should trust solely; For man is always full of lies, We should distrust him wholly:« So they must burn to ashes. 8. Two huge great fires they kindled then, The boys they carried to them; Great wonder seized on every man, For with contempt they view them. To all with joy they yielded quite, With singing and God-praising; The sophs had little appetite For these new things so dazing. Which God was thus revealing.
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⁹⁶ MARTIN LUTHER, »A New Song Here Shall Be Begun,« trans. G. MacDonald (in: LW 53; 211–216).

9. <i>They now repent the deed of blame,⁹⁷ Would gladly gloze it over; They dare not glory in their shame, The facts almost they cover. In their hearts gnaweth infamy – They to their friends deplore it; The Spirit cannot silent be: Good Abel's blood out-poured Must still besmear Cain's forehead.</i> 10. <i>Leave off their ashes never will, Into all lands they scatter; Stream, hole, ditch, grave – nought keeps them still With shame the foe they spatter. Those whom in life with bloody hand He drove to silence triple, When dead, he them in every land, In tongues of every people, Must hear go gladly singing.</i>	11. <i>But yet their lies they will not leave, To trim and dress the murther; The fable false which out they gave, Shows conscience grinds them further. God's holy ones, e'en after death, They still go on belying; They say that with their latest breath, The boys, in act of dying, Repented and recanted.</i> 12. <i>Let them lie on for evermore – No refuge so is reared; For us, we thank our God therefore, His word has reappeared. Even at the door is summer nigh, The winter now is ended, The tender flowers come out and spy; His hand when once extended Withdraws not till he's finished.</i>
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97 The broadsheet version, as well as the Erfurt *Enchiridion* version, do not include stanzas 9 and 10. They were probably a later addition, meant as an alternate ending to the original ending in verses 11 and 12 here. See WA 35; 94.