

Unmasking the Hidden God: Luther's »Wundermänner«

By Patrick Hayden-Roy

I Introduction

In 1935, Rudolf Thiel, towards the end of his two-volume biography of Luther, included a chapter titled »Vaterland«.¹ In it Thiel emphasized Luther's deep love of his fatherland: its land, speech, and folk. He painted an especially pathos-filled picture of Luther's distress at the state of his German people as a result of their mistakes, disunity, and oppression by outside powers. Yet, he noted, Luther was a prophet, who saw further than others; he didn't want anything to do with »parliamentarianism« or »democracy«, but, having studied history, knew that the hope of a people is that God would send a »Führer«, a »Wundermann«, who would stand above and outside all written law, a rare and precious gift from God. »So hat ein Deutscher vor vierhundert Jahren seinem Volk die Ehrfurcht vor den großen Führern, die das Schicksal außerwählt, gepredigt«.² Similarly, Otto Scheel, in his 1934 work *Evangelium, Kirche und Volk bei Luther*,³ in the very last section of his study turned to discuss the effect of Luther on the unity of Germany, and whether it would not have been better for Luther to have bent his neck to the yoke of Rome rather than to have brought division and weak-

1 R. THIEL, *Luther von 1522 bis 1546*, 1935, 342–348.

2 »Thus four-hundred years ago a German preached reverence towards a great Führer whom Fate had elected«. Loc. cit., 348. (Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.).

3 On Scheel, see H. LEHMANN, *Luther als Kronzeuge für Hitler. Anmerkungen zu Otto Scheels Lutherverständnis in den 1930er Jahren* (in: DERS., *Protestantische Weltsichten*, 1998, 153–173).

ness to his German people. Scheel rejected this thought, not only because the division of Germany wasn't Luther's fault, but rather the fault of foreign influences, but also because Luther could do nothing other than be true to who he really was. And who was he really? Here Scheel introduced Luther's concept of the heroic man, whom, said Scheel, Luther elevated above the merely moral or bourgeois man. Luther taught, noted Scheel, that such men weren't elected or made, but rather created and driven by God. In that category, Scheel suggested, Luther belonged. His failure wasn't his fault, but rather the fault of those who failed to rise to his call:

Nun muß die Frage verstummen, zu der Worms Anlaß gegeben hat. Luther konnte und durfte nicht widerrufen. Und hätte er sich auf Bahnen drängen lassen, auf die ihn nicht der eigene Genius führte, so hätte er den Weg verloren. Nicht er und sein Handeln sind das Problem, sondern das Verhalten des Volkes zu dem aus ihm emporsteigenden Genius. Er ist die seltene Gabe an ein Volk, aber auch Schicksal seinem Volke. Die Gabe kann weder erzwungen noch abgewehrt werden. Sie kommt wie eine Schöpfung. Auf dem Volke liegt die Verantwortung. Es kann nicht murren oder klagen, daß ihm ein Genius geboren wurde. Es wird nur vor die Entscheidung gestellt, ihn anzunehmen oder abzulehnen. Im Ja und Nein sind Segen und Leid beschlossen. So wurde Luther unser deutsches Schicksal.⁴

Clearly both Thiel and Scheel found a little noted byway of Luther's thought strikingly suggestive for their own historical situation and commitments, and while one might suspect them of a wholesale distortion of Luther's intellectual world, in fact they were picking up on what was a previously ignored dimension of Luther's political thought.⁵ It can be no acci-

4 »Now the question that was raised by Worms must be silenced. Luther could not and must not recant. And had he let himself be pushed onto a path to which his own genius did not lead, then he would have lost his way. It wasn't himself and his actions which were the problem, but the reaction of the people to the genius that rose up out of him. He is the rare gift to a people, but also the fate of the people. The gift can be neither forced nor rejected. It comes like an act of creation. The responsibility lies upon the people. They can't mutter and complain a genius was born unto them. They are merely posed the decision, to take him on, or to reject him. In the yes and the no are contained the blessing or the sorrow. Thus Luther was our German destiny.« O. SCHEEL, *Evangelium, Kirche und Volk bei Luther*, 1934, 72f.

5 E. WOLGAST, *Die Wittenberger Theologie und die Politik der evangelischen Stände*, 1977, 30 Anm. 21 credits Scheel with being the first to place significant emphasis on Luther's focus on the Wundermann, though in fact Scheel notes »mit dem Bilde Luthers ihn in

dent that the interest in this element of Luther's thinking should first emerge at the point where »heroic« leadership was in the process of making itself the sole basis for the sovereign state in Germany. And while Thiel and Scheel's partisan readings of Luther's concept are untenable, in fact Luther did have a lifelong fascination with what he termed »Wundermänner« or »viri heroici« in history, figures who operate outside the normal channels of morality and law, and who bring about great empires, reset the trajectory of history, or render heroic justice.⁶ And while in the 1950s, especially, many studies would take note of this aspect of Luther's thought, they were generally brief, and in connection to some other larger theme, such as law, history, or social teachings. This study will bring the construction to the center of Luther's thought, highlighting his long-term engagement with his »Wundermänner«, how this concept worked as a sort of fulcrum in his relating of eternity to the saeculum, how it regulated his reading of figures historical and biblical, and how interestingly it can recast the substance of his separation of the »Two Kingdoms«.

II Luther's Concept of the Wundermann

Who, or what, were the Wundermänner? As with many issues related to Luther's political thought, the definition of terms can be problematic.⁷

Verbindung zu bringen, ist jedenfalls nicht das Übliche«, 69 and cites F. LAU, »Äußerliche Ordnung« und »weltlich Ding« in *Luthers Theologie*, 1933, 51 and following, to whom should go that status. Prior to Lau, if any attention was paid to this aspect of Luther's thought, it was only to deny that it had any significance. See the comments by LAU, loc. cit., 50–52.

6 WOLGAST (see n. 5) notes that the »Literatur zum vir heroicus ist kaum übersehbar.« And while it is true the topic is treated in a number of works on Luther, mostly in the period from the early 1930's through the 1950's, it has typically a somewhat provisional status. There is no extended study focused on the theme, and the topic mostly appears as an adjunct theme in studies that are concerned with Luther's understanding of law, his teaching on the »two kingdoms«, or the cooperation between God's will and human actions.

7 See the discussion of W.D.J. CARGILL THOMPSON, *The »Two Kingdoms« and the »Two Regiments«: Some Problems of Luther's Zwei-Reiche-Lehre* (JThS 20, 1969, 164–185), where he details the confusions caused by Luther's inexact use of terminology, a problem

Luther used a variety of terms in his discussion of heroes: »Wundermänner«, »Wunderleute«, »vir heroicus«, »vir miraculosus«, or simply »Helden«.⁸ All the terms refer to figures whose actions bespeak a special capability and destiny, which don't conform to and cannot be judged by the usual standards of human society. Functionally there were two different sorts of figures to whom Luther typically applied the term: first were the classical heroes of antiquity, such as Hannibal or Alexander the Great,⁹ whose remarkable achievements stand as a sign of God's providential favor; second were the heroes of the Old Testament, such as Abraham or Joseph,¹⁰ whose remarkable successes bespeak their status as God's chosen, though unlike the heathen heroes, they confessed the one true God, knew their benefactor, and as a result have a different status in Luther's eyes. In both cases, how-

that has relevance for other areas of his political thought beyond the »Two Kingdoms«. See esp. 165–169.

- 8 According to Grimm, the term »Wundermann« or »Wundermänner« in German comes into usage with Luther. The earliest references in Grimm start with Luther, though the definitions given in Grimm do not capture Luther's application of the term to figures outside of the Bible and Christendom.
- 9 It is difficult to provide a full list of those heathens to whom Luther assigns this status, since he frequently will in off-hand fashion make a list of figures who are conventionally understood to represent the heroic personages of antiquity. The most referenced of these figures is Alexander the Great, who embodies for Luther the heathen Wundermann. Beyond Alexander, Scipio and Hannibal represent the military division of the Wundermänner most frequently, Augustus Caesar typically stands in for the Roman Emperors. Figures of Greek literary antiquity, such as Hercules, Achilles, or Hector, occasionally pop up, as do political leaders such as Themistocles. Heathen rulers of the Old Testament, such as Nebuchadnezzar or Cyrus, are more ambiguously referenced, while the Pharaohs of Abraham and Joseph's time are given a peculiar status as heathens who were not only Wundermänner, but who exhibited an inner knowledge of God that typically attached only to the Old Testament fathers and Christian rulers.
- 10 Luther's list of Old Testament figures who are unambiguously Wundermänner is generally predictable: Noah, Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and David being the most prominent. Some figures, such as Samson or Moses, necessitate a more complicated explication of their status. While Luther references some rulers from a more contemporary Christendom, such as Charles of Burgundy or Frederick the Wise, for the most part he is not engaged by figures from his own epoch. Though see Luther's comment recorded in WAT 6; 321,26–322,8, Nr. 7006 where he waxes nostalgic about the giants who were alive during his youth.

ever, the heathen and godly heroes are designated by their successes in worldly affairs, which gave them their place among the select few secular chosen.

Conceptually Luther drew his notion of the heroic from both ancient literature and from contemporary Renaissance approaches to history, though most importantly from Scripture. Aristotle, in his *Politics*, chapter three, part 13, provided reference to a figure whose gifts so exceed that of the common lot that they are dominant; Aristotle noted that this is the basis in many states for ostracism, so that one person does not dominate the many, though he also noted at the end of the passage that the state of nature might suggest that citizens should happily obey such a person, and he be king for life.¹¹ Beyond Aristotle, ancient historians such as Polybius and Plutarch, with their emphasis on the character of the ruler, provided a moralizing perspective with which Luther would have been familiar from the common Renaissance approach to history as moral philosophy taught by example. However, while Luther's view of how one judged figures of the past was informed by these sources, his own perspective on the role and significance of the *Wundermänner* was uniquely his own, drawn from his theology and exegesis of Scripture, and, as discussed below, was not the moralizing approach of the »Prinzenspiegel« literature or of Renaissance history writing.

A more precise definition of the term results from looking at how one became a *Wundermann*. While the status itself was determined by one's ability to accomplish great deeds, ultimately such accomplishments were the result of God's direction. In a number of places Luther defined the process, most explicitly in his *Commentary on Psalm 101*, written in 1534 for the benefit of the recently elevated Elector John Frederick of Saxony, and published in 1535.¹² Toward the beginning of the work he advised the new prince about how things are situated in the world of power:

11 Luther references this passage in his *Commentary on Psalm 101*, WA 51; 212,30–32; LW 13; 161. It is noteworthy that Aristotle was the teacher of Alexander the Great, whose career represented the submission of the Greek cities to a dominating ruler, and who was, for Luther, the epitome of the godless *Wundermann*. See the discussion of Alexander below.

12 The text is published in WA 51; 197–264, translated in LW 13; 145–224. For background on this text see M. BASSE, *Ideale Herrschaft und politische Realität. Luthers Auslegung des 101. Psalms im Kontext von Spätmittelalter und Reformation* (ZfK 114, 2003, 45–71).

Gott hat zweierley leute auff erden jnn allerley stenden. Etliche haben einen sonderlichen sternen fur Gott, welche er selbs leret und erweckt, wie er sie haben wil. Die selben haben auch als denn guten wind auff erden und, wie mans nennet, glück und sieg. Was sie ansahen, das gehet fort, und wenn alle welt da wider streben solt, so mus es hinaus ungehindert. Denn Gott, ders jnen jns hertz gibt, jren sinn und mut treibt, der gibts jnen auch jnn die hende, das es geschehen und ausgericht werden mus, Als Samson, David, Joiada und der gleichen. Und nicht allein gibt er zu weilen solche leute unter seinem volck, sondern auch unter den Gottlosen und Heiden, und nicht allein jnn Fürstenden, sondern auch jnn Bürgern, baurn und handwercks stenden. Als jnn Persen land den König Cyrum, jnn Griechen den Fürsten Themistoclen und Alexandrum magnum, bey den Römern Augustum, Verspasianum etc. Item, Inn Syrien gab er durch den einigen man Naeman alles heil und gluck 4. Reg. 5. Solche leute heisse ich nicht gezogene oder gemachte, sondern geschaffene und von Gott getriebene Fürsten oder herrn.¹³

As with the spiritual Kingdom, where salvation is the result of the imputation of grace into the being of the faithful, so with the chosen within the world of power, whose worldly blessings result from the action of the sovereign God. Such successes are not the result of instruction or writing, are not hereditary, and can't be willed:

Denn Gottes wunder erben nicht und sind auch nicht unser eigen noch uns unter worffen wie die güter, haus und hof. gott wil frey sein solcher wunderleute und Edel steine zu geben, wenn, wo und wem er wil.¹⁴

13 WA 51; 207,21–36; »God has two kinds of people on earth in all walks of life. Some have a special star before God; these He teaches Himself and raises them up as He would have them. They are also the ones who have smooth sailing on earth and so-called good luck and success. Whatever they undertake prospers; and even if all the world were to work against it, it would still be accomplished without hindrance. For God, who puts it into their heart and stimulates their intelligence and courage, also puts it into their hands that it must come to pass and must be carried out; that was the case with Samson, David, Jehoiada, and others. He occasionally provides such men not only among His own people but also among the godless and the heathen; and not only in the ranks of the nobility but also among the middle classes, farmers, and laborers. For instance, in Persia He raised up King Cyrus; in Greece, the nobleman Themistocles and Alexander the Great; among the Romans, Augustus, Vespasian, and others. In Syria, too, He brought all success and prosperity through one man Naaman (II K 5:1). I do not call such people trained or made but rather created; they are princes and lords directed by God«. LW 13; 154f.

14 WA 51; 209,23–26; »God's miracles are not inherited; they do not belong to us, nor are they subject to us the way possessions, house, and home are. God wants to be free to give such extraordinary leaders, such jewels, when, where, and to whom He pleases«. LW 13; 157.

As with God's grace, such people do not possess the miraculous characteristics that they exhibit in their deeds, but such gifts are imputed. One can read Luther's point here both in terms of the blessings provided by the Wundermann himself to the time and people among whom he works and resides,¹⁵ and the miraculous gifts the Wundermann personally possesses; in neither case is it the work of the person or the society that brings about the wondrous leader. He made this point in relation especially to the great figures among the godless:

In Annibale magnus animus et singularis industria est, hac putat se Romanos vincere. In Alexandro sunt maiora dona, quibus instructus foeliciter gerit omnia. Sed istae quasi larvae sunt, quas solas videmus: Gubernationem divinam, qua aut stabiliuntur imperia, aut evertuntur, non videmus.¹⁶

Luther noted that the heathen fail to recognize or give thanks to the one who is the source of their blessing, and as a result their ends are typically unhappy,¹⁷ which points out the differentiation between the godly and god-

15 The use of the masculine pronoun is appropriate, since Luther does not identify women in the role of wundermänner, though he does find the female counterparts of the Old Testament fathers possess remarkable characteristics that bespeak a special status in relation to God. However, they do not play an active role in the world of power, and as such do not fit the profile of the miraculous ruler and actor who changes the trajectory of worldly events through the mastery of the outward world. Luther does not treat those instances where women did rule, such as, for instance, Cleopatra, though one suspects he would not have been impressed with her achievements. In the Old Testament women intermingling with positions of power are almost uniformly portrayed negatively, such as Jezebel, and would have, for Luther, represented not the influence of God but the devil in human affairs. For something of a summary of Luther's perspective on women in positions of power see WAT 1; 528,13–28, Nr. 1046. For Luther's treatment of women in his Genesis Commentary see M.L. MATTOX, *Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs: Martin Luther's Interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the Enarrationes in Genesin*, 1535–1545, 2003.

16 WA 42; 507,16–19. »Hannibal thinks that he is conquering the Romans by reason of the great courage and the extraordinary diligence he possesses. Alexander has greater gifts, which enable him to be successful in all his undertakings. But these are ›masks‹. They are the only things we see. But God's control, by which governments are either strengthened or overturned, we do not see«. LW 2; 343. See H. BANDT, *Luthers Lehre vom verborgenem Gott*, 1958, especially 106.

17 »Diese sind also geschickte leute, das sie nicht viel lerens noch schreibens bedurffen, was und wie sie thun sollen. Und ehe man sie leret, was sie thun sollen, haben sie es ge-

less among the Wundermänner, an issue that will be addressed further below.

The issue of God's prerogative when it comes to making Wundermänner was of more than academic interest to Luther. It was important for him that no one make the mistake of considering that the key to wondrous deeds involved imitating the work and actions of the true Wundermänner. He spent not a little time in his interpretation of Psalm 101 emphasizing that for the great majority of us, great and humble alike, the everyday course of affairs was our lot. We were not created equal when it comes to the gifts of rule; for the Wundermann there was one course, since he worked through a natural reason that was not accessible to all, while most must work through the written law.¹⁸ In the Psalm 101 commentary he compared normal rule to patching the holes in a fur, which was tiresome and unsatisfactory, but the best of which one was capable. He addressed this point at length in the Genesis commentary as well. There he was especially sensitive to the example of Müntzer, who thought he had a special calling – thought he was a Wundermann – when he did not, as opposed to Abraham or Lot:

Sicut seditiosus Monetarius rusticis suis proponebat exemplum Davidis pugnantis contra Syros, ac iubebat, ut eodem modo ipsi quoque pugnarent contra nobilitatem. Hoc est exemplum transferre in ius, et ex facto regulam facere, id nunquam abit sine certo periculo, et est ratio, quia discedere a regula et nudo facto niti, est Deum tentare. Qui igitur

than, on das sie bedurffen Gottes wort, das sie lere solch jr glück und grosse thatten Gotte zu schreiben und jm die ehre geben, von dem sie es haben, und sich selber nicht preisen noch rhümen, welchs sie on Gottes wort nicht thun noch zu thun wissen, darumb auch selten ein gut ende nemen, wie alle Historien zeugen.« WA 51; 207,37–208,1. »Such people are so clever that they do not need much teaching or writing to show them what to do and how to do it. Before one teaches them what to do, they have already done it. They do, of course, need instruction from the Word of God to ascribe their success and great achievements to God, to give honor to Him from whom they receive it, and not to praise and glorify themselves. They do not do this without the Word of God, nor do they know how to do it; therefore it is also quite rare for them to have a happy end, as all historical records attest«. LW 13; 155.

¹⁸ He references Plato, and his distinction of the »Justum natura« versus the »Justum Lege«, which Luther defines as the »gesunde recht und das krancke recht,« the latter being the tool of the ordinary, and the former the source of inspiration for the Wundermann. WA 51; 214,14–28; LW 13; 163f.

non vocantur certo mandato extra regulam, ut sint viri miraculosi (ut sic dicam) hi se intra regulam contineant, et non impingent, nec errabunt. Sed Loth, Abraham et similes sunt miraculosi viri, quorum spiritus rapitur extra legem, extra exemplum et consequentiam. Habent enim singularem vocationem et impetum, quem tu non habes.¹⁹

The Wundermann is, as Luther frequently notes, a *rara avis*,²⁰ and in most instances the pretension that you are one of these elect few is a sign that you are not.

III Wundermänner among the Heathen

And what were the exact signs for Luther that one was so chosen? While he never provided a general profile of the type, his specific discussions of a number of figures provides a good sense of what exactly the qualifications were. Among the heathen, perhaps most useful as an ideal of the type is Alexander the Great, whose accomplishments left a deep impression on all the epochs of Western culture that followed him, and who almost inevitably showed up on all of Luther's lists of Wundermänner. First of all, what qualifies Alexander in Luther's eyes was simply the fact of his conquests and empire, which remade the world within which he resided. He reset the course of history. This could not happen without the special hand of God

19 WA 43; 61,33–42. »The rebellious Münzer used to present to his peasants the example given by David when he fought against the Syrians; he ordered the peasants to fight in the same way against the nobility. This is turning an example into a law and making a rule out of an action. The result of this is never without certain danger, for to depart from the rule and to rely on the bare deed is to tempt God. Therefore those who are not called by a specific command outside the rule, to be ›wonder men‹ (if I may use this expression), should keep within the rule. Then they will not transgress or err. But Lot, Abraham, and their like are ›wonder men‹; their spirit is carried away beyond the law, beyond example and consequence. For they have an extraordinary call and impulse. You do not«. LW 3; 260f.

20 See WA 11; 267,30f; LW 45; 113, where he makes this point in connection to the rather low character of most rulers, and their usual role as simply God's hangmen and rod of punishment. Apart from his comments in the 1523 tract *Von weltlicher Oberkeit*, Luther does not present the example of the *vir heroicus* as a practical guide to the good ruler on how to succeed, but rather to provide perspective on how God operates in the world.

directing him.²¹ Alexander had the impulse to govern beyond the laws, and could use force to gain that which he desired.²² And while he was an exceptional military leader, comparable to Hannibal and Scipio, unlike those two he was also a gifted ruler, who knew how to exercise his power in Herculean fashion.²³ He was so secure in his rule, and focused so much on securing his rule through accomplishments, that he was able to disdain the insults directed against him in the streets and at court,²⁴ a quality that Luther com-

21 »Wo von solt der grosse Alexander so frisch und rüstig, so kûne und glückselig gewesen sein? Es sind alles Gotts und der Engel werck, was sie nützlichs odder glückseliges haben odder thun.« WA 23; 513,5–7; »How else should Alexander the Great have been so alert and active, so bold and happy? Whatever they may have or do that is useful or fortunate is all the work of God and the angels.« LW 20; 171.

22 »Isti singulares motus et heroici spiritus supra communem regulam et rationem sunt. Quemadmodum in politico regimine videmus discrimen quoddam gubernatorum et principum: quidam in gubernatione servant leges et ius commune: Quidam non, ut Alexander nullis legibus se adstringi patitur, sed perrumpit suo quodam impetu, quod ab aliis fieri nequaquam posset.« WA 43; 228,3–8; »Those extraordinary impulses and heroic spirits are beyond the ordinary rule and conduct, just as we observe some differences among rulers and princes in their direction of state affairs. Some observe the statutes and the common law, but others do not. Alexander, for example, does not allow himself to be bound by any laws but forces his way through by some impulse of his. This could not be done at all by others.« LW 4; 128f.

23 »Und wie kûndte man feiner einen Fürsten oder K nig auff erden malen, denn die Heiden haben jren Herculem gemalet? Was solt man mehr w ndschen an einem weltlichen F rsten, wenn er Hercules thaten gleich were oder jm folgete? War ists, S nde oder laster lauffen mit unter, was ist das wunder jnn einem Heiden? So wol auch die Heiligen Gottes, als David etc. gefallens sind, Aber im regiment sind sie gleich wol seine Helden blieben. Was feilet Alexandro magno Und seinem vater Philippo? Item Augusto, Traiano und jren gleichen, wenn man sol F rstliche exempel haben zum weltlichen regiment?« WA 51; 243,23–31. »How could a prince or king on earth be portrayed any better than the heathen have portrayed their Hercules? What more could be desired in a secular prince than that his deeds resemble those of Hercules, or that he follow Hercules' example? It is true, that example includes sins or vices, too. But is this to be wondered at in a heathen, when even the saints of God like David have fallen? But in the exercise of government they have nevertheless remained fine heroes. What is wrong with Alexander the Great and his father Philip, or with Augustus, Trajan, and their kind, if one is seeking noble examples of worldly government?« LW 13; 199f.

24 »Und die Heiden haben sich hierin anders und anders gehalten. Da mag ein jder exempel von nemen, wie er wil. Die grosmt tigen F rsten habens gemeinlich verachtet, als der

pares favorably to what was practiced among the ancient Israelites as a result of the teachings of Moses, who would not tolerate speaking back to authority, and who, as a result, spilled much innocent blood.²⁵ In general Alexander represented the cleverness and worldly wisdom that in places Luther typified as more common among the heathen than the Christians,

grosse Alexander, da jm gesagt ward, wie man ubel von jm redet, thet er nichts dazu, zürnet auch nicht, sondern sprach: ›Regium est benefacere et male audire‹, Ey es gehet Königlich zu, wenn wirs gut machen, und die leute ubel davon reden. Als solt er sagen: Königliche tugent sind zu hoch, das sie der tolle pöbel solt verstehen, und zu gut, das sie solten von unützen leuten gelobt werden. Solchs hat er gelernt aus seinem Propheten Homero, der schreibt von einem unfleter, Thersite, der kund sonst nichts, denn seinem Könige fluchen.« WA 51; 245,19–29; »The attitude of the heathen toward this [slander] has varied, and everyone may find examples to suit him. The noble-minded princes have generally disdained it. When, for instance, Alexander the Great was told that people were saying bad things about him, he did nothing about it and did not become angry. He said: ›The royal thing to do is to do good and to hear poorly. Things are succeeding royally, if we do a good job and the people speak evil about it.‹ It is as though he said: ›Royal virtues are too high for the mad public to understand and too good to be paised by good-for-nothing people.‹ He learned this from his prophet Homer, who writes about a nasty fellow named Thersites, who could do nothing but curse his king.« LW 13; 202.

- 25 »Aber bey dem volck Israel ist eine todsunde gewest wie bey vielen andern Heiden auch. Denn die Jüden hieltens fur Gottes lesterung und tödten auch drüber die rechten, heiligen Propheten, so doch aus ampts pflicht und Gottes befelh beide, Könige und Propheten, straffen musten, wie wir jnn allen Propheten lesen. Aber es halff sie ir ampt nicht. Wenn sie der Könige laster und abgötterey strafften, So musts heissen Got und den König gelestert und flugs getödtet. Daher muste dienen der spruch Mosi Exo. 23: ›Du solt den Göttern nicht fluchen noch den Obersten deins volcks lesteren‹. Mit dem spruch und schwert Mosi ist gar viel unschüldigs bluts vergossen, gleich wie jtz der name Kirche und Oberkeit auch viel unschüldige Christen mus tödten und plagen.« WA 51; 245,30–246,2; »But among the people of Israel, as well as among many other heathen, slander against the king was a mortal sin. The Jews regarded it as blasphemy; because of it they slew the true and holy prophets, who were in this duty bound, and bidden by God, to denounce both kings and prophets, as we read in all the prophetic books. But their position did not help them. When they denounced the vices and the idolatry of the kings, then it was only necessary to cry, ›They have blasphemed God and the king!‹ and they were quickly put to death. A statement of Moses (Ex 22:28) must have contributed to this: ›You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.‹ With this passage and the sword of Moses very much innocent blood was shed, just as the names ›church‹ and ›government‹ must kill and torment many innocent Christians nowadays.« LW 13; 201f.

who by comparison were foolish and simple.²⁶ Of course ultimately all the virtue exhibited by Alexander paled in comparison to the grace that God bestows upon his people, since his fortune was only within the material world, which would never satisfy him. Luther noted how Alexander, having almost conquered the known world, but having become aware that there were other worlds unconquered, sighed and expostulated »And I have not yet even conquered one!«. For Luther this epitomized the emptiness of worldly treasures, and the insatiability of the human heart, such that a heathen such as Alexander, who did not know the source of his good fortune, remained lost and unfulfilled.²⁷ This highlighted the fact that, whatever the achievements of the heathens, and compared to the accomplishments of God's people they were impressive when measured in terms of the material world, they ultimately fell short of the greatest feats of heroism, which were reserved for those ancient paragons who populate the pages of the Old Testament.²⁸ It is in discussing them that a full view of Luther's Wundermänner comes into focus.

26 »Denn Gott ist ein milder, reicher herr, der wirfft gros Gold, Silber, Reichthum, Herrschafften, Königreiche unter die Gottlosen, als were es sprew oder sand. Also wirfft er auch unter sie hohe vernunft, weisheit, sprachen, Redekunst, das seine lieben Christen lauter kinder, narren und bettler gegen sie anzusehen sind.« WA 51; 242,15–19; »God is a gentle and wealthy Lord. He casts much gold, silver, wealth, dominions, and kingdoms among the godless, as though it were chaff or sand. Thus He casts great intelligence, wisdom, languages, and oratorical ability among them, too, so that His dear Christians look like mere children, fools, and beggars by comparison.« LW 13; 242.

27 »Cor est vorago semper hians, omnia cupit, etsi omnia assequeretur, tamen quaereret plura. Vide Alexandrum Magnum, qui cum toti fere orbi dominaretur, tamen cum audit plures mundos esse, ingemuit dicens: Et ego nondum unum vici. Sic plane innumerabiles mundos cupit illius animus. Quis hic vel eloquentissimus possit assequi affectum illum vanissimum istius cordis? Est indicibilis ista vanitas et insatiabilitas cordis humani. Was er hat, das gefelt im nicht, was er nicht hat, da sehnet er sich nach.« WA 20; 23,20–27; »The heart is a constantly yawning chasm; it wants everything, and even if it obtained everything, it would go on looking for still more. Look at Alexander the Great. He was lord of almost the whole world. Yet when he heard that there were more worlds, he sighed: »And I have not yet conquered even one!«. Thus his heart wanted innumerable worlds. How could anyone, even the most eloquent, adequately describe the enormous vanity of this man's heart? The vanity and insatiability of the human heart are unspeakable. What a man has does not please him; what he does not have, that he yearns for.« LW 15; 19.

28 See below, n. 34.

IV Wundermänner in Genesis

Particularly in Luther's Genesis Commentary,²⁹ and elsewhere where he discussed the Old Testament, he raised up numerous figures who epitomized the figure of the Wundermann. Figures such as Abraham or Joseph exceed in Luther's estimation the achievements of the heathen Wundermänner, since they knew the one who was the author of their works.

Alexandri, Annibales, Scipiones inter se contendunt, quis gloria rerum gestarum vincat, sed ego Abrahamum antepono omnibus. Non enim caeco impetu, aut temerario ausu: Sed in fide se hostibus opponit, atque ita vincit. Habuit enim cogitationem, quam neque Alexander, nec Scipio habere potuit: Domo per spiritum sanctum hanc opinionem secum in aciem attulit, quod esset victurus, et redempturus fratrem Loth. Hoc in victoria hac maxime admirabile est, quo omnes omnium gentium victorias quantumvis splendidas vincit.³⁰

This sort of qualitative difference between the victories of Abraham and those of the heathen was based on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within

29 The Ennarationes in Genesin, given as lectures from 1535–1545, have been subject to scholarly controversy concerning the authenticity of their content, since they rely on the notes of Luther's audience, and, aside from the first volume, were published after his death. The main work asserting editorial meddling with their content was P. MEINHOLD, *Die Genesisvorlesung Luthers und ihre Herausgeber*, 1936, whose arguments have until recently inhibited the use of these lectures for the study of Luther's theology. However, more recent studies have rejected much of Meinhold's arguments, and rehabilitated the Genesis Commentary as a source for Luther's views. See in particular U. ASENDORF, *Lectura in Biblia: Luthers Genesisvorlesung (1535–1545)*, 1998, especially 33 and following; in addition, MATTOX (see n. 16), 263–273, provides an overview of the issues involved as well as the recent scholarly questioning of Meinhold's thesis. In general, the result of this debate has been to affirm the Genesis Commentary as a reliable guide to Luther's late theology, and militate against explaining textual incongruities by reference to editorial interventions.

30 WA 42; 530,26–33; »The Alexanders, the Hannibals, and the Scipios vie among themselves over supremacy in the glory of achievement, but I place Abraham ahead of them all. He faces the enemy, not with a blind attack or with reckless daring but in faith; and so he is victorious. He had an insight that neither Alexander nor Scipio could have: through the Holy Spirit he brings along from home into battle the conviction that he would be victorious and that he would release his brother Lot. This is what is most admirable in his victory; and this is why it surpasses all the victories of all the heathen, be they ever so brilliant«. LW 2; 374.

Abraham, and suggested, in fact, that spiritual enlightenment was a positive benefit when ruling the secular sphere; Abraham had a conscious awareness of the rightness of his actions, while the Alexanders and Hannibals behaved as sleepwalkers, led by the spirit of God unbeknownst to them. In Luther's discussion of the Old Testament fathers, he saw the indwelling spirit of Christ active in their souls, which led him to identify them as Christians, which might seem incongruous except that for Luther Christ is present eternally as the Word of God. And like all Christians, the actions of Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Samson, and others (though not Joseph, as will be discussed below) were not above reproach in terms of the outward conduct of their affairs, as was the case with the heathen as well (see footnote 23 above). As with all things divine, there was a purposefulness to God's interactions with his people, and in the case of the Old Testament fathers, as opposed to the sometimes veiled character of his purposes when it comes to heathen Wundermänner, Luther generally saw the doings of God as recorded by Scripture to be explicable. On the one hand we see the actions of Noah, Abraham, and the like clearly moving forward God's revelation of himself to the world, and their actions and victories demonstrating the positive benefits of God's favor. Noah's case was instructive. Luther heaped praise upon him for his faithfulness, noting the degree to which his faith maintained the presence of God's spirit among humanity in a time of exceptional depravity: »His omnibus corruptis stat solus Noah Vir vere miraculosus. Is neque ad sinistram nec ad dextram deflectit, retinet verum cultum Dei, retinet doctrinam puram et vivit in timore Dei.«³¹

31 WA 42; 300,21–23. »When all these people became corrupt, Noah alone remained steadfast, a truly amazing man. He turned aside neither to the left nor to the right; he retained the true worship of God; he kept the pure doctrine and lived in the fear of God«. LW 2; 56. Later he adds emphasis to this point, stating, »Haec magna virtus fuit. Nobis enim hodie impossibile esse videtur, ut unus se opponat toti orbi terrarum, reliquos omnes damnet tanquam malos, qui tamen Ecclesiam, verbum et cultum Dei iactant, se autem solum statuatur Dei filium et Deo acceptum esse. Est igitur Noah vere Vir miraculosus. Et commendat hanc ipsam animi magnitudinem Moses, cum diserte addit: ›in suis generationibus, seu ›suo seculo«. Quasi dicat, quod tamen pessimum et corruptissimum fuit.« WA 42; 301,15–21; »This was an outstanding virtue. To us today it seems impossible that one man should defy the entire world and condemn as evil all the rest, who glory in the church, the Word, and the worship of God, and that he should maintain that he alone is a

In commenting on Gen 14:15, Luther noted how Abraham's military victories are marked by his willingness, once the purposes of God have been achieved, and evil of those who had seized Lot had been punished, to deal mildly and justly with those he conquered, not engaging in wanton plunder or unregulated violence.³² In general the wondrous works of the Old Testament fathers, while set into comparison with the heathen Wundermänner, were given a soteriological significance that is mostly absent when considering heathen works, whose larger purpose are often masked.³³ He made this clear explicitly at one point:

Etsi igitur Monarcharum, ut Alexandri, res gestae admirabiles et magnificae sunt, etsi ab eruditis hominibus oratione sunt pulcherrime illustratae, tamen comparatae ad sacras historias sunt merae tenebrae, carent enim luce, et vere sunt ut tabula bene picta, sed in

son of God and acceptable to God. Noah, accordingly, is truly an amazing man. Moses bestows praise on this great courage by adding explicitly: ›In his generation,‹ or ›in his age,‹ as though he were to say that it was indeed the worst and the most depraved«. LW 2; 56.

- 32 »Singularis igitur spiritus sancti motus hic describitur ad nostram, consolationem, ut sciamus, quam mirabiliter Deus agat cum sanctis suis: ut discamus in tentatione sperare: extra tentationem autem moderari impetus. Liberato fratre deponit arma Abram: non effertur victoria, nec, cum facillime posset, armis sibi comparat locum, in quo cum suis habitet. Tam praeclarus victor sua sorte contentus est, et exilium, ad quod se vocatum norat, non mutat. Haec digna sunt observatione.« WA 42; 531,16–22; »The extraordinary prompting of the Holy Spirit is described in this passage for our comfort. We should know how wonderfully God deals with His saints, that we may learn to have hope in trials, but to restrain our rash impulses when we are not being tried. After Abram has set his brother free, he lays down his arms. He does not become arrogant because of his victory; nor does he by force of arms take possession of a place where he may dwell with his people, although he could very easily do so. The distinguished victor is satisfied with his lot and does not give up his exile, to which he knows he has been called. These facts are worthy of note«. LW 2; 375.

- 33 »In Annibale magnus animus et singularis industria est, hac putat se Romanos vincere. In Alexandro sunt maiora dona, quibus instructus foeliciter gerit omnia. Sed istae quasi larvae sunt, quas solas videmus: Gubernationem divinam, qua aut stabiliuntur imperia, aut evertuntur, non videmus.« WA 42; 507,16–19; »Hannibal thinks that he is conquering the Romans by reason of the great courage and the extraordinary diligence he possesses. Alexander has greater gifts, which enable him to be successful in all his undertakings. But these are ›masks.‹ They are the only things we see. But God's control, by which governments are either strengthened or overturned, we do not see«. LW 2; 343.

obscuro angulo collocata, ut conspici nequeat: Sunt ut corpus sine capite, ut caro sine spiritu.³⁴

With the fathers one sees the full light of God's work in the world.

Even when the father's fail to behave as if they have the Spirit of God at work within them, that too is purposeful. Abraham, for instance, lied about the status of Sarah as his wife more than once. In the first instance it was the cause of a terrible plague being sent to the Pharaoh, who, assuming Sarah to be available, brought her to his court, in order to make her his wife, and thus stood on the brink of participating in adultery. Recognizing that the plague that struck his household was of divine provenance, he discovered his sin, and gave Sarah back to Abraham, and even held back from punishing him for his deception. Luther explained the whole episode by noting how it provided an opportunity for Pharaoh to realize the perception of his rule as tyrannical, since Abraham feared for his own life on the assumption that Pharaoh would not hold back from killing him to have his way with Sarah. This bespoke a sensibility on the part of Pharaoh that, for Luther, suggested the work of the Spirit within him. In all Luther saw this episode as an example not of Abraham's deceit, but as a means through which God revealed his glory in supporting a man of great faith, and bringing Pharaoh to a knowledge of the true God.³⁵ In discussing Gen 20:11–13,

34 WA 42; 513,12–16. »Even though the achievements of monarchs like Alexander are marvelous and grand, and even though learned men have described them very beautifully in words, nevertheless, compared with the sacred accounts, they are mere shadows; for they lack the light and are truly like a picture that has been well painted but has been placed in a dark corner so that it cannot be seen. They are like a body without a head and like flesh without a spirit«. LW 2; 351.

35 The whole discussion, which is extensive, is found in WA 42; 470–493. As regards the interactions with Pharaoh, and his punishment, Luther notes, among many considerations, the following: »Quinta causa est illa mirabilis ratio, secundum quam Deus nihil aliud facit, nisi quod gloriam suam et Maiestatem ostendit. [...] Neque absurdum fuerit, ad hunc ordinem praesentem historiam referre. Nam hoc manifestum est, quod occasione poenarum divinitus inflictarum Rex venit ad cognitionem Dei et verae religionis.« WA 42; 491,31f; 37–39; »The fifth cause is that amazing procedure by which God does nothing that does not reveal His glory and majesty. [...] It would not be out of place to assign the account before us to this category. For it is clear that on the occasion of divinely inflicted punishments the king came to the knowledge of God and of the true religion«. LW 2; 321.

where Abraham once again posed Sarah as his sister because he feared that his life would be in danger should she be known as his wife, Luther assessed his behavior somewhat differently, noting that his fearfulness represented his weakness, which stood as a sign for God's faithful that even the saints were subject to the weaknesses of the flesh, yet were still beloved of and blessed by God.³⁶ An even more egregious instance of saintly weakness was represented in Gen 19:30 and following by the interactions of Lot with his daughters, with whom he had sexual intercourse. One might anticipate that such a shocking transgression would dim Lot's star some, especially given that his credentials for the status of Wundermann were somewhat thinner than other Old Testament worthies, but Luther was resistant to that interpretation of him. He saw the exigencies of the situation into which Lot and his daughters were thrown, suffering the trauma and disturbance of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, their wits confused as a result, and in that context falling into sin. Luther did not mitigate the severity of the sin, but he saw this as another instance where God used the weakness of the saintly Wundermann to provide a context for the faithful to consider their own sins, and to realize that one should never become complacent, thinking that one's status as God's chosen made one immune to the weakness of the flesh. Neither the heroic acts of the Wundermann nor his failings were made manifest so that one should imitate them, but in both instances they

36 »Etsi autem magnifice commendatur per Prophetas et Apostolos fides Abrahae, tamen historia docet rediisse saepe usitatam infirmitatem. Vere enim Deus sanctos suos mirabiliter ducit: Aliquando incedunt simpliciter, ut alii homines, et videtur fides quasi sepulta, rursus alio tempore pleni spiritu faciunt mirabilia, sicut supra quoque de Helia ostendi, qui magno spiritu mactabat pseudopphetas. Et postea ad nuncium de furore Isabelis trepidabat, ac secedebat in desertum.« WA 43; 130,18–24; »Moreover, even though the faith of Abraham is given high praise by the prophets and apostles, the account nevertheless shows that he often returned to his habitual weakness. For God really leads His saints in a marvelous manner. Sometimes they simply go along like other men, and their faith seems to be buried, so to speak; again, at another time, they are full of the Spirit and perform marvelous deeds, as I pointed out above concerning Elijah, who slew the false prophets with great courage, then trembled when he was informed of Jezebel's fury, and withdrew into the desert«. LW 3; 355. See also the discussion of H. BORNKAMM, *Luther und das Alte Testament*, 1948, 18, footnote 3, where he addressed the differences in Luther's view of Abraham's behavior at different points in his commentary, and rejected the view that this is an instance of textual editorial meddling.

served as witnesses to God's way of acting in the world, both to give blessing and to bring even the greatest into distress, and to send sorrow and trauma their way. Ultimately, Luther imagined, Lot and his daughters would have received just this sort of consolation from Abraham.³⁷

The broad latitude Luther allowed his Old Testament Wundermänner raises some difficult questions about how he differentiated between those to whom he assigned this status, and those he did not. The divide between those who were raised up as paragons, and those who were condemned as outside God's graciousness defines sharply how Luther's reading of these accounts is fitted into his larger theological perspective. This is best exemplified in the case of Jacob and Esau. Not surprisingly, Luther followed Scripture in assigning to Jacob the status of God's chosen, given that it is revealed to Rebecca that the elder will serve the younger. For Luther this reversal allowed him to explore the alterity established between the two as an instance where that which is lowlier and weaker in worldly terms, and in the eyes of the law, is given favor over that which is stronger, more noble, and has the law and custom on its side. This interpretation played itself out in Luther's response to the very brief typification in Gen 25:27 of Esau as a hunter, and Jacob as a man of the tents.³⁸ This passage prompted Luther to engage in an extended and somewhat tendentious account of Esau's arrogant and domineering ways in comparison with the studiousness and piety of Jacob. The extended discussion that follows of the history of Esau and Jacob, the stealing of the birthright and blessing, and the eventual reconciliation, is the best example of how Luther's treatment of the Wundermänner transposes and analogizes his theology of grace. Luther saw Jacob as the exemplar of the faithful Christian, trusting in the promises of God, being blessed despite his status as the younger and, according to the law, the lesser, but chosen by God to inherit the promises given to Abraham and Isaac, to become the progenitor of a great people. His inheritance of these promises, however, and his great works, were made possible by his willingness to operate outside the normal laws that govern human affairs, which is enabled by God's indwelling Spirit. Particularly instructive of Luther's reading of Jacob and his actions were the events surrounding Rebecca and

37 See WA 43; 95,8–99,30; LW 3; 307–313.

38 See WA 43; 408,9–413,37 and LW 4; 378–386.

Jacob's seizure of the blessing Isaac intended for Esau.³⁹ Though in conventional terms the actions of both are reprehensible, using subterfuge to frustrate the wishes of the father, and to steal from Esau what in strict legal terms belongs to him, Rebecca has a prophecy from God that Jacob is to inherit what normally would fall to Esau, so that both she and Jacob, in order to remain faithful to the will of God, were fully justified in doing what otherwise would be a misdeed.

Cum igitur essent certi Iacob et Rebecca pertinere primogenituram ad Iacob ex oraculo et ex malis fructibus ac moribus Esau, debuerunt contemnere legem et regulam, et sequi exceptionem, qua transtulit Deus primogenituram ab Esau ad Iacob.⁴⁰

He further on noted that in this instance the First Table of the Law trumps the Second, justifying the contravention of the prohibitions of the Second Table.⁴¹ He emphasized in this context the lowliness of Jacob, how God chose to honor that which is rejected by the world, an analogue to his theology of the cross.⁴² As in the debate with Erasmus over free will, Luther

39 Gen 27:1–45 and following. See WA 43; 497,1–552,12 and LW 5; 3–179.

40 WA 43; 506,26–29; »Accordingly, since Jacob and Rebecca, as a result of the prophecy and of Esau's evil fruits and morals, were sure that the primogeniture belonged to Jacob, they were duty bound to disregard the law and rule and to follow the exception by which God transferred the primogeniture from Esau to Jacob«. LW 5; 113f.

41 In a number of places in the Table Talk, Luther noted that the difference between Saul and David was that Saul sinned against the First Table, David against the Second Table. Sins against the First Table were often not seen as sins, and thus not repented, while sins against the Second Table were recognized as such, so that Saul sought no forgiveness, while David repented. Consequently, obedience to the First Table was in this sense more difficult, and a measure of one's recognition of and respect for God's sovereignty, while violations of the Second Table often led one to recognize one's sinful nature, and seek the mercy of God. See WAT 1; 438,7–439,7, Nr. 877.

42 »Sic facile potest responderi ad hanc quaestionem satis difficilem de facto Rebeckae et Iacob. Lex et regula sanxit, ut Esau esset primogenitus. Sed Deus cum sua prima tabula fecit translationem, imo mutavit illam legem, et sic decrevit: Esau nolui: Iacob volui. Proinde non peccarunt, sed pie et sancte fecerunt Rebecca et Iacob, atque omni iure spoliaverunt Esau, et rapuerunt feudum illud primogeniturae. Non potuerunt per vim obtinere. Quia non poterat fieri sine seditione. Quod enim ad promissionem et iurisdictionem attinebat, Ecclesia pariter et politia ac tota domus Isaac opposuissent se Iacob. Antecellebat enim Esau viribus et iure. Iacob longe erat inferior, contemptus et oppressus.« WA 43; 508,1–10;

accentuated with his Wundermänner the freedom of God to accomplish what he wills, in this case in governing the affairs of the material sphere.⁴³

While Jacob was raised up, Luther condemned Esau in harsh terms for much of his commentary. He embodied all that is puffed up and proud about the world, and represented what Luther least liked about the powerful of the world. Esau was no saint or hero for the very fact that he regarded himself as such, and as such was seen by Luther as the embodiment of the entire world and its sinfulness.⁴⁴ Though Luther's approach to scriptural exegesis involved a careful attention to the text, his treatment of Jacob and Esau represents well how his conceptual categories dictated his interpretation of the text in a sometimes tendentious fashion; it is hard to find the deep evil of Esau in comparison to Jacob in the textual material. Luther himself, in the end, seemed to recognize this, since in the final episode where Jacob and Esau confront one another, with Jacob's return from the house of Laban and his reconciliation with Esau, Luther speculated that Esau likely was saved after all, that his heart may have been softened and turned.⁴⁵ This is somewhat perplexing, given Luther's earlier unbounded condemnation of

»In this way one can easily answer this rather difficult question about what Rebecca and Jacob did. The law and the rule ordained that Esau was the first-born; but God, with His First Table, made the transfer. Indeed, He changed that law and decreed as follows: »Esau I did not want; Jacob I did want.« Hence Rebecca and Jacob did not sin. No, they acted in a godly and saintly manner. They had every right to despoil Esau and to deprive him of that fief of the primogeniture. They were unable to obtain it by force, for this could not be done without a quarrel. For so far as the promise and the legal authority were concerned, the church as well as the government and the entire house of Isaac would have opposed Jacob. Esau, you see, was superior in power and right. Jacob was far inferior; he was despised and oppressed«. LW 5; 115f.

43 Later in the Genesis Commentary there is an instructive side note to his discussion of the travails of Leah, and God's blessing of her with a child, Gen 29:31, as opposed to beautiful Rebecca, as follows: »Est et ipse maxime heroicus et sine regula: tamen ita declinatur aut demittit se, ut nusquam tam acutum videat, quam si abiecta et humilia intuetur.« WA 43; 646,14–16; »He Himself [God] is also a very great hero and is subject to no rule. Yet He bends down, or lowers Himself, in such a way that there is no place where He sees so sharply as He does if He looks at what is downcast and lowly«. LW 5; 315. All that was wondrous about the Wundermänner was ultimately a projection of the wondrous and confounding nature of God.

44 See Luther's discussion of Gen 25:27; WA 43; 408,9–413,37 and LW 4; 378–386.

45 See the discussion of Gen 33:4 in WA 44; 122,11–124,16 and LW 6; 164–166.

Esau, who was emblematic of the diabolical forces that governed the material world. Luther summarized the whole episode between Jacob and Esau somewhat cryptically as follows: »Et est verisimile Esau tandem salvatum esse. Ideo autem Deus discrimen hoc inter Iacob et Esau, item Isaac et Ishmael constituit, ut ostenderet regnum suum esse simpliciter spirituale.«⁴⁶ This suggests that the whole outward course of affairs that throws up heroes in wondrous fashion and casts down the proud was, in Luther's view, ultimately there to represent in material terms the larger spiritual truths that one must grasp in order to understand humanities' ultimate condition.

While in most instances Luther emphasized not only the triumphs but also the failings of the Old Testament saints, his treatment of Joseph came closest to pure hagiography. Joseph is the most highly praised and wonderful of Luther's Old Testament Wundermänner. In many ways his life and actions recapitulate what Luther had already said about Joseph's predecessors, and in particular his father. Yet Joseph is a much better exemplar of the humble man who rises up to great power and fame. Unlike Jacob, whose struggle to gain preeminence had to be carefully rationalized as obedience to God's will, Joseph was a true victim, sold into slavery, accused of misdeeds with his master's wife, but all the while humble and conscious of his unworthiness to rule over others. And despite all of that, God gave him great power over all of Egypt. And even when he attained great power it did not corrupt him. For Luther, he stood out even in comparison to other heroes; certainly no heathen exhibited his knowledge of the one from whom his blessings flowed. But it was not just his spiritual knowledge that was greater, as he was, according to Luther, a greater master of force than even Alexander:

Pharao igitur sapientissimus Rex fuit, siquidem vidit in Ioseph esse Spiritum sanctum, et eius consilia et actiones omnes habituras esse prosperos successus. [...] Ego sane duce Ioseph malim militare, quam sub Alexandro magno. Quanquam enim aliquos interdum natura fortes et Martios invenias, tamen eorum exiguus est numerus, Thrasonum vero immensa est copia, qui ad primum conspectum hostis illico fugam capessunt, die Störtzhansen, Marterhansen etc. Verum siquando dat Deus talem ducem et bellatorem, qualis

46 WA 44; 123,34–37; »It is also likely that in the end Esau was saved. God made this distinction between Jacob and Esau and likewise between Isaac and Ishmael to show that His kingdom is purely spiritual«. LW 6; 166.

fruit Ioseph aut Moses, is potest vincere exiguis copiis cervorum ingentem exercitum leonum: quia scriptum est Proverbiorum 28: »Iustus quasi leo confidens absque terrore erit.«⁴⁷

This pointed up the material benefits a truly Christian ruler would have in pursuing warfare and other endeavors in the world of force, though Luther found Joseph exceptional even among that cohort because of his remarkable humility.⁴⁸

Indeed Joseph's virtue radiated outward onto the Pharaoh, who is sainted simply for recognizing Joseph's status as God's chosen. While there were instances where Luther dispensed praise on other heathen rulers of the Old Testament for their relative benevolence toward God's chosen – the Pharaoh at the time of Abraham, or the Abimelech who interacted with Isaac, who, Luther suggested, was a saintly king and sharer in the promise⁴⁹ – Luther elevated Joseph's Pharaoh among the saints for his treatment of Joseph.

Pharaoni hic fit aditus ad regnum et agnitionem Dei et spiritus sancti, sine circumcissione, sine ullis aliis ceremoniis patrum. Non enim urget, nec requirit eas Ioseph, suggerente spiritu sancto, ipsi tantum et posteritati eius hasce impositas esse et mandatas:

47 WA 44; 425,10–21; »Accordingly, Pharaoh was a very wise king, since he saw that the Holy Spirit was in Joseph and that all his plans and actions would have successful results: [...] Indeed, I would rather go to war under the leadership of Joseph than under Alexander the Great. For although you would occasionally find some men brave and warlike by nature, yet their number is small. But the number of Thrasos is immense. At the first sight of the enemy they – bullies, cursing troopers, etc. – take to flight at once. But whenever God gives a leader and warrior such as Joseph and Moses were, He can conquer a great army of lions with small forces of deer; for it is written in Prov 28:1: 'The righteous are bold as a lion'«. LW 7; 170.

48 »Gloria rei militaris summa est in hac vita, sicut praeclarissima dona fuerunt in Achille, Alexandro magno, Scipione, se fortissimis illis heroibus praefert Salomon Ioseph, Davidem, Mosen. Neque quisquam illorum conferendus est ad Ioseph, siquidem est dominator animi sui per humilitatem«. WA 44; 436,17–20; »In this life military glory is greatest. Thus Achilles, Alexander the Great, and Scipio had very remarkable gifts; but Solomon prefers Joseph, David, and Moses to those very brave heroes. Not one of them can be compared to Joseph, since he is the ruler of his heart through humility«. LW 7; 135.

49 For Abraham's Pharaoh, see WA 42; 484,36–485,35 and LW 2; 311f; for Abimelech, see WA 43; 463,18–464,17 and LW 5; 51f.

Regem vero Aegypti aut reliquas gentes iis neutiquam gravandas esse. Semini Abrahae circumcisio fuit necessaria, propter futurum Christum, qui ex illo semine nascendus erat. Sed hic Pharaon fit Christianus, eruditur verbo fidei verae pietatis, perinde ac alii gentiles salvati sunt absque circumscisione, ac loquitur ex eo spiritus sanctus.⁵⁰

Joseph's holiness not only spilled over onto Pharaoh, but his example led Luther to consider how, for the sake of the heroic holiness of the pious, God preserves and blesses society at large:

Haec igitur est gubernatio Sanctorum et sapientia Ecclesiae Dei, non scandalizari consiliis Dei, neque offendi eius facie, qua occurrit nobis. Interdum enim involvit illam et abscondit, ne possimus eam agnoscere et intueri. Est quidem Deus vitae, gloriae, salutis, laetitiae, pacis, quae vera facies Dei est, sed tegit eam nonnunquam, et induit aliam larvam, qua offert se nobis tanquam irae, mortis et inferni Deus. Vide igitur ut sapias et intelligas, discas et audias, quid sibi inusitata et aliena specie vult. Id enim agitur, ut humilioris, ut sustineas et expectes manum Domini, et faciem revelatam.⁵¹

In fact what made Joseph's piety so remarkable in the eyes of Luther was his ability to remain patient in the face of all his tribulations, to trust that God was with him, and that all his blessings would be made manifest in time,

⁵⁰ WA 44; 420,24–32; »For Pharaoh this approach to the kingdom and knowledge of God and the Holy Spirit is made without circumcision or any other ceremonies of the fathers; for Joseph does not urge or demand them, since the Holy Spirit suggested to him that these have been imposed and enjoined only on him and his posterity, but that the king of Egypt and the rest of the Gentiles should by no means be burdened with them. Circumcision was necessary for the descendants of Abraham on account of the future Messiah, who was to be born from those descendants. But here Pharaoh becomes a Christian; he is instructed in the Word of faith and true piety, just as other Gentiles were saved without circumcision. And the Holy Spirit speaks through him«. LW 5; 163f. Luther provides even more fulsome praise of the Pharaoh later on when he welcomes Joseph's family into Egypt; see WA 44; 624,40–625,15 or LW 8; 62.

⁵¹ WA 44; 601,33–41; »This, then, is the way the saints are governed and the wisdom of the church of God, namely, that they are not scandalized by the counsels of God or offended by the face with which He meets us. For sometimes He wraps it up and hides it, lest we be able to recognize or look upon it. He is indeed the God of life, glory, salvation, joy, and peace; and this is the true face of God. But sometimes He covers it and puts on another mask by which He offers Himself to us as the God of wrath, death, and hell. See to it, therefore, that you are wise and understand, that you learn and hear what He means with His unfamiliar and strange form. For this is done in order that you may be humbled, that you may endure and wait for the hand of the Lord and the revelation of His face«. LW 8; 31f.

despite the fact that in the moment it seemed only others benefited from his virtue. Despite the fact that God's face was masked for much of Joseph's life, he knew that behind all the seeming tragedies of his existence lay the providential and benevolent hand of God, so that he was even able to forgive and console his brothers for their brutal selling of him into slavery, telling them that it was designed by God to bring about a higher good. Luther concluded his discussion of this passage with the following observation:

Quicquid vero boni accidit toti mundo, agnoscendum est, et praedicandum gratis animis, et sciendum, Deum et pacem et alia beneficia praestare multis millibus causa electorum suorum. Tametsi iis quidem non parcat, sicut Ioseph servire sinit tot annis, et tandem pro precio servitutis in carcerem coniici summa ignominia. Sic nimirum remunerat sanctissimos, qui plurimum prosunt [...].⁵²

In this way Joseph exhibited the highest understanding of God's work within the material world, leading Luther to elevate him above all other Old Testament heirs of God's promises. It is clear with Joseph the huge divide between the heathen Wundermänner and someone like Joseph, since they, with their concept of fate or fortune, can in no way understand the purposefulness of the divine being in directing the circumstances of the material world, and see their own successes as a function of self-possessed virtue, or the favor of forces other than the sovereign Lord of the cosmos. In his outward life, Joseph represents for Luther the fullest recognition of the inner Spirit that is the true source of the success of the *vir heroicus*.

V Sword-wielding Wundermänner: Moses, Samson, David

While the »Christians« of Genesis exhibited only sporadically the martial virtues that were one aspect of the Wundermann, other heroic figures who come forward later in the Old Testament allowed for a fuller exploration of this dimension. In particular, Moses, Samson, and David enabled Luther to

⁵² WA 44; 346,8–13; »But whatever good befalls the whole world must be acknowledged and proclaimed with grateful hearts, and one must know that for the sake of His elect God bestows peace and other benefits on many thousands. Yet He does not spare even the elect. Thus he lets Joseph be a slave for so many years and finally, as a reward for his servitude, lets him be cast into prison in utter disgrace. In this way He undoubtedly rewards the saintliest people, who do the most good«. LW 7; 62.

explore the triumphs and tribulations that come to even the most heroic saint and Wundermann when faced with the exigencies of rulership.

One would anticipate that Moses' status as a Wundermann might loom large in the eyes of Luther. After all, his deeds, confronting the Egyptians with wondrous miracles, then leading the Israelites from their enslavement, receiving the law of God, and also wielding the sword of judgment and punishment among the faithless idolators, are unmatched. Certainly Luther devoted an enormous amount of attention to Moses.⁵³ But his representation of him and his actions was much more ambiguous than with other heroes of the Old Testament, and while clearly Moses was chosen by God to do his work and will, Luther did not exhibit the sort of enthusiasm and sympathy for him as a worker of God's wonders as he did for just about any of the other wonder workers of the Old Testament; in fact, Luther's lists of Wundermänner typically did not include Moses. This did not mean he failed to perceive him in this fashion at all. When considering Moses' actions in striking and killing the Egyptian oppressing the Israelites, as reported in Ex 2:12, Luther attributed this action not to Moses seeking vengeance, but the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which moved him to this action because God desired that Moses become a leader among the Israelites, and that he lead them against the Pharaoh.⁵⁴ Later Luther also added a caution about not imitating Moses' action, since it was a violation of the fifth commandment against murder. Moses did it because he is one of God's great »wunderleute«, so that his violation of the fifth commandment represented a deeper obedience to God's indwelling Spirit.⁵⁵ But Moses' association with the reception of the written law that came from God situated him in a different sort of relationship to God than was typical of the Wundermann, whose inspiration was inward, at odds with outward law and custom. The distinguishing mark of the *vir heroicus*, as epitomized by Moses in the above passage, is the deviation from the law as it would be typically

53 If one simply counts the number of pages in the Personenregister of the Weimarer Ausgabe, Luther devotes more attention to Moses than any other Biblical figure except for Jesus – for comparison, Moses takes up 25 pages in the register, Paul, the second most cited figure, 21 pages. See WA 63; 408–433; 464–485.

54 See WA 16; 26,27–35.

55 WA 16; 27,4–27.

understood, often where the recognition of the sovereignty of God over creation involved obedience to the First Table of the Law, and violating the Second Table, as Moses did in killing the Egyptian. Luther considered much of the Law of Moses to be customary law, given to the Jews, but not binding for other peoples. Even the Ten Commandments can be seen in that light, though Luther considered them to be the distillation of natural law, whose legitimacy would be recognized by all peoples. In general, the Law of Moses was just the sort of written legal code that the true Wunderman rose above. Hence, while Moses was a mighty man of God, he did not elicit Luther's full wonder as did other figures of the Old Testament.⁵⁶

In contrast to the ambiguity of Luther's disposition toward Moses, Samson received Luther's full embrace. Luther's treatment of Samson provides an excellent example of his integration of Old Testament heroes into his theological vision.⁵⁷ As a judge of Israel, Samson was a prime candidate for the role of Wundermann. Israel's judges were marked by their direct authorization from God, who gave them the charisma and power to smite the oppressors of Israel.⁵⁸ On the other hand, Samson presented some vexing issues that complicate the crafting of his heroic image, from his lack of spiritual virtues, to his weakness for questionable female companionship, and the seemingly magical source of his great strength.⁵⁹ But in many ways Samson was a quintessential Wundermann, since his deeds were so clearly the result of divine favor, and were of such striking proportions. Luther was clearly fascinated with Samson, and he comes forward numerous times in the Table Talk when Luther reflected on the force needed to counteract the ravages of the Turks. In more than one passage Luther expressed his great wonder at the story of Samson, and at one point directly identified with

56 On Luther's complicated perspective on Moses, see BORNKAMM, Luther (see n. 36), 107 and following, and particularly the section titled »Mose der Christ«, 126–139.

57 R. HERMANN, *Die Gestalt Simsons bei Luther*, 1952, chose to investigate Luther's interpretation of Samson because it provides such a sharp definition of Luther's approach to biblical exegesis.

58 Luther noted in an entry in the Table Talk how the Book of Judges served as a description of the heroes that were sent by God, and who, by acknowledging their achievements as extensions of God's power, provided a model of piety. See WAT 1; 209,15–20, Nr. 475.

59 Indeed Luther noted that, were the story not lodged in Scripture, one would be inclined to group it together with other fabulistic stories; see WAT 2; 369,14–17, Nr. 2218.

him, wishing for an end similar to Samson's, where his death would bring disaster to the Turkish enemy.⁶⁰ Luther was careful to set Samson's actions in the proper frame, explaining, for instance, that his dependence on his hair, and his loss of strength when it was cut off, did not come from some sort of magical power in the hair itself, but from the fact that his uncut hair stemmed from a sacred vow, so that cutting his hair represented a sin against God, who thus withdrew his favor.⁶¹ Luther connected Samson's great feats of strength directly to the indwelling Spirit of God; for Luther Samson stood out because he acted alone, was so Herculean in his feats, and and was so vulnerable to the sins of the flesh.

*Mirabilis igitur praeliator et salvator fuit prae caeteris omnibus, qui spiritus instinctu et impulsu fecit omnia, etiam in ipsa morte. [...] Ita Simson, sive in Israel esset, sive apud Philistaeos, in Gath aut Estaol, confisus Deo eodem impetu ferebatur in hostem. Neque extat usquam in gentilium aut in sacrarum literarum historiis simile exemplum bellatoris tam fortis et invicti, qui adversus totum populum insurgere et pugnare ausus sit, et tot clarissimas victorias obtinuerit sine ullo exercitu aut apparatu bellico, cum quidem nec statura nec forma aliis esset dissimilis, quanquam robur in eo maius et impetus excellentior esset.*⁶²

In some ways Samson was a figure quite close in his virtues to the great heathen heroes, whose feats were purely of a physical and worldly sort. And Luther recognized the degree to which Samson took his pleasure with women, unlike, say, the exemplary comportment of Joseph with Potipher's wife. In the Table Talk, Luther is recorded as stating:

Spiritum Samsonis fuisse Spiritum Sanctum sanctificantem, qui affert secum motus oboedientes et servientes Deo. Spiritus autem in gentilibus possumus etiam dicere, id

⁶⁰ See WAT 1; 35,1–13, Nr. 93.

⁶¹ See WAT 1; 120,19–121,6, Nr. 289 and WAT 2; 369,10–14, Nr. 2218.

⁶² WA 44; 785,29f.34–786,2; »Accordingly, Samson was a remarkable warrior and savior above all the others. He did everything at the prompting and impulse of the Spirit, even in death itself. [...] Thus Samson, whether he was in Israel or among the Philistines, in Gath or in Eshtaol, trusted in God and rushed against the foe with the same fury. And nowhere in the histories of the heathen or of Holy Scripture is there a similar example of a warrior so brave and invincible – a warrior who had the courage to rise up and fight against a whole nation and gained so many exceedingly brilliant victories without any army or military equipment, although he was not different from others either in stature or in appearance. Yet he had greater strength and superior vigor«. LW 8; 281f.

est, motus, *das thut Got auch*, sed non est motus sanctificans. Exemplum Samsonis saepe miror. *Es muß ein starke remissio peccatorum bey yhm sein gewesen*. Vires humanae non potuerunt hoc, quod ipse fecit.⁶³

So unlike the heathen, the spirit of God that inhabited Samson had the effect of sanctifying him, though the effects of the Holy Spirit in him seem to have purely related to his destruction of the Philistines, and not have contributed to any sanctification of understanding; there is no passage in Judges that reflects Samson repenting of his sins, or calling upon God for anything but some physical blessing.⁶⁴ Ultimately Samson was numbered among the saints because his story fits into a larger narrative of salvation; Luther saw his role prophesied by Jacob, and ultimately sees him preserving Israel, through whom Christ will eventually be incarnated into the world.⁶⁵ In addition, Luther could project himself imaginatively into the person of Samson, and see Samson's struggles as exemplary of the circumstances of humanity within the world of sin.⁶⁶

Finally, of all the Wundermänner of the Old Testament, Luther's most expansive treatment was devoted to David, who more than anyone else combined both the piety of the ancient fathers of Israel, the military prowess of the great heathen conquerors, along with the fullest negotiation of the vexing task of ruling in the political sphere. In this regard David provided the best model for the Christian prince struggling with the exigencies of

63 WAT 1; 206,16–21, Nr. 473; »The spirit of Samson was the Holy Spirit, who makes holy and who produces actions which are obedient to God and serve him. We can also speak of the Spirit among the heathen; that is, God also acts among them, but this is not sanctifying action. I often wonder about the example of Samson. There must have been a strong forgiveness of sins in his case. Human strength couldn't do what he did«. LW 54; 80.

64 In fact there are only two passages in which we see Samson address God: Jg 15:18 and following, where he thirsts and God provides water, and, most famously, Jg 16:28, where the blinded Samson calls upon God to provide him the strength to wreak vengeance on his malefactors, and subsequently kills more Philistines with his death than he ever did in life.

65 See Luther's interpretation of Jacob's prophecy concerning Dan, Gen 49:16–18, WA 44; 785,1–790,3, and in particular 788,41–789,19; LW 8; 280–287, especially 286.

66 Luther, in a comment in the Table Talk, also sees Samson as an analogy of Christ: »Missa enim et coelibitus sunt duae columnae papatus, quas Samson Christus movet; ruent cum magna iactura mundi.« WAT 5; 458,30–32, Nr. 6046.

rulership.⁶⁷ When Luther wanted to advise the recently elevated Duke John Frederick, he chose a Psalm of David, the 101st, to tutor him about the nature of political office and how to hold it. In the Psalms Luther saw the theological truths reflected that were also found in Paul.⁶⁸ Not only did David provide the inspired words which served Luther as the text out of which to develop his reflections, but his life provided what was a summary of all the virtues and marks of Godly rulership and actions that typified the Wundermänner who had gone before or who would come after. David from an early age had an instinct for his status in the eyes of God, eschewing armor and taking on Goliath almost unarmed.⁶⁹ His rule of his kingdom is based above all on keeping close to the Word of God and establishing the right worship of the Lord.⁷⁰ He showed his understanding of the exigencies of rulership, waiting to punish evil until the moment was propitious, but always having in mind the good of his subjects.⁷¹ And when he had no means to suppress evil, he turned to God and wrote his Psalms.⁷² As with other saintly figures, David was not preserved from tribulations, but was plagued especially by demons,⁷³ and he committed grave sins, and this stands as testimony to the all-prevalent presence of sin and tribulation in the lives of even the most holy of people, and also to the mercy of God. And David knew how to repent, and his repentance and trust in the mercy of

67 »Doch ist hie aber mal zu dencken, wie droben auch gesagt ist, Das die Weltweisen oder welt regenten nicht alle gleich sind, Sondern wie David ist zu seiner zeit und jnn seinem regiment fur andern Heiligen Gottes ein Wunderman gewest zum exempel allen fromen Königen und Fürsten [...].« WA 51; 244,1-4; »Here again, as was stated above, it must be kept in mind that the worldly-wise or the worldly rulers are not all alike. In his time and in his administration David was an extraordinary man, ahead of the other saints of God, an example to all pious kings and princes [...].«; LW 13; 200. See also the comments of BORNKAMM, Luther (see n. 36), 9f.

68 See WAT 3; 8,19-30, Nr. 2824.

69 WA 51; 208,35-40; LW 13; 156.

70 WA 51; 216,12-34; LW 13; 166f.

71 WA 51; 206,13-207,36; LW 13; 153f.

72 See WAT 1; 389,1-7, Nr. 810. Luther was especially taken with the rhetorical gifts of David; see WAT 6; 317,22-33, Nr. 7001.

73 David's sufferings at the hands of the Devil had the compensatory result that he wrote his Psalms, and stand as a model for how all should deal with their suffering. See WAT 1; 87,29f, Nr. 199.

God reconciled him with God, and led God to bless him and his people.⁷⁴ David stood above heathen Wundermänner; though outwardly blessed in his rule as they were, his private life was nothing but sorrow, a sort of heroic suffering; but nevertheless he maintained his faith in God's mercy to the end, and trusted in the Lord, as demonstrated in his Psalms.⁷⁵

VI *Making (and Unmaking) the Wundermann*

The existence and activity of the Wundermänner raised the question of God's interventions into the saeculum, why and how God effects the understanding and circumstances of events in the world. Theoretically, Luther was resistant to inquiring too deeply into the fundamental bases of God's doings, since he is God and we are not.⁷⁶ Yet in practice, Luther addressed quite a bit about the unseen actions of God in the material sphere, and in particular the means through which he brings forth and directs the actions of the Wundermann. Most directly Luther defined in his commentary on Zachariah orders through which God mediated his interventions into the world and affected its course. Luther defined four regiments through which God works in the world: directly through his own power, through the ministrations and influences of his angels, through human preachers and apostles, and through the worldly regiment, which included not only princes and magistrates but also the household. Luther emphasized that God

Also kunde [...] auch wol friede halten, die bösen straffen, die fromen schützen on schwert und fursten, Er wils aber nicht thun, sondern hats also geordnet, das die fursten

⁷⁴ See Luther's comments in WAT 1; 348,1–349,8, Nr. 723. See also footnote 43.

⁷⁵ WAT 1; 413,45–414,14, Nr. 848, and 415,1–8, Nr. 850, provide some of the fullest testimony of Luther's regard for David, and particularly his deep sympathy for David's tribulations. In WAT 2; 53,16–19, Nr. 1333, Luther went so far as to suggest that the proportions of David's sufferings were so great that Luther doubted he would have been able to have endured them, and ended by noting that the heroic suffering of the Old Testament saints obscured more than it promoted an understanding of God's grace.

⁷⁶ See, for instance, Luther's comments on Gen 1:2 in his Genesis Commentary, WA 42; 9,21–10,10 and LW 1; 10f, or the comments recorded in the Table Talk, WAT 4; 642,34–643,12, Nr. 5071.

sollen yhm helfen, das ist: Er wil mit yhn und durch sie solchs thun. Drumb sind alle regimente sein und rechte göttliche regiment, on das er dazu braucht Engel und menschen, auff das er beweyse seine wunderliche macht, weisheit und guete.⁷⁷

God could do all things through his will and word, in the same fashion through which he first brought about creation. But he does not choose to work in that fashion. Why this is so is beyond the capacity of humans to understand; history and Scripture reveal to us that he does work in this way. Each of the three »outward« regiments – angels, spiritual, and secular rulers – has their own means through which they carry out their role. Secular rulers have the sword, which is given a broad definition – »Durchs schwert aber verstehe ich alles was zum weltlichen regiment gehört, als weltliche rechte und gesetze, sitten und gewonheite, geberden, stende, unterscheidene empter, person, kleider, etc.«⁷⁸ Spiritual rulers are given the word, offices and sacraments. And to the angels is given reason (»verstand«) through which to work. And each of these regiments complements the other, so that the peace afforded by the worldly regiment allows for the successful dissemination of the Word of God through the spiritual authorities, and allows for the effects of the angels to take hold. Though Luther also noted that there is a hierarchy to this complementary relationship, since the angels could theoretically use the means of the spiritual and worldly regiments, and the spiritual rulers could use the means of the worldly regiment, but the worldly regiment, which is the least and lowest of the three, could not use the means of the other two, and what it brings about, namely

77 WA 23; 513,29–35; »[...] could also maintain peace, punish the evil, protect the good without sword and princes. Yet He does not wish to do it this way but has ordained that the princes should help Him; that is, He wishes to work with them and through them. Therefore all rules are His and are true, divine rules; nor does He need angels or men to prove His wonderful might, wisdom, and goodness«. LW 20; 171 f. Luther's comments suggest the nominalist distinction between God's absolute and ordained powers; see G. WHITE, *Luther as Nominalist*, 1994, in particular 172 and following. More specifically about Luther's use of the terms »potestas dei absoluta et ordinata:« see D. LÖFGREN, *Die Theologie der Schöpfung bei Luther*, 1960, 230 and following.

78 WA 23; 514,1–4; »By the sword, however, I understand all that pertains to secular rule, all secular rights and laws, customs and habits, actions, stations, various offices, persons, clothes, etc«. LW 20; 172.

order, only affects the material circumstances of humanity, and not the eternal fate of the human soul.⁷⁹

It is within this matrix of orders and means that the *Wundermänner* functioned and had their purpose. Most obviously, they inhabited the regiment of worldly rule, and brought order and change to that sphere. But the purpose of this was not simply for its own sake, but in order to promote the purposes of the divine plan. In most situations Luther was able to assign a clear higher purpose to the achievements of the *Wundermänner*: for instance, the Roman Empire, which came about by the actions of Augustus Caesar, made possible the wide dissemination of the Gospel within its lands, which would not have been possible without its peace and order.⁸⁰ Even though many of the Emperors understood their actions in terms of their own desires and interests, in fact they were, unbeknownst to themselves, serving the purposes of God. And in fact, when looked at in light of the role the angels play, their ideas and actions were not even their own.

The role that angels play in Luther's theology is much underappreciated.⁸¹ Their influences and actions permeate creation. In relation to the *Wundermänner*, angelic influence lay behind all their successes. While in the accounts of the Old Testament heroes the role of angels is manifest, the historical accounts of the »godless« heroes of antiquity did not provide such perspective, or if there is attributed a force at work aiding them, it is some divinity that Luther would not have regarded as legitimate. As Luther

79 WA 23; 514,17–31; LW 20; 172.

80 »In Summa, quicquid facio, in tuum commodum facio. Sicut Paulus dicit ›Piis omnia cooperantur in bonum.‹ Sic Augustus per pacem aperuit orbem, ut Euangelion latius spargeretur. Sic rex Babylonis transtulit Iudaeos in Babylonem, ut verbum et lex Dei seminaretur etiam in gentes. Sic Ioseph in aulam Pharaonis admissus est, ut religionem ibi plantaret et cresceret. Sic quicquid operor, inquit, fit in tuum commodum, semper es in conspectu meo, quia es depictus in palmis meis.« WA 25; 309,31–37.

81 Luther spoke explicitly in numerous places about the nature and role of angels; for instance, »Sermon von den Engeln« (29. September 1530), WA 32; 111,10–121,24. See P.M. SOERGEL, Luther on the Angels (in: *Angels in the Early Modern World*, ed. by A. WALSHAM / P. MARSHALL, 2006, 64–82), in particular 67, where he notes the prevalence of references to the angels in Luther's works. He also notes the degree to which Luther, unlike Calvin, affirmed a good deal of the medieval tradition of angelology: What is particularly striking, though not mentioned by Soergel, is the personal warmth with which Luther embraced the angels, and the comfort he took from contemplating their presence.

noted, the heathen ancients explained the successes and failures of the material universe as a result of fate or chance, or attributed them to divine forces they didn't understand.

»Drumb haben die heiden solchs dem glück zugeschrieben und einen abgott draus gemacht, Denn sie sahen und erfuren, das solch ding geschehe, Wusten aber nicht, das der rechte Gott durch seine heilige Engel thet.«⁸² But in fact, behind all the seemingly wondrous actions of the *vir heroicus* stood the influence of the angels, bringing into the mind of the hero some thought that moved him to actions that were just right to bring success.

Solchs und der gleichen offenbarung der Engeln zeigt an, wie sie on unterlas so mit uns thun, unsichtbarlich und verborgen, das yhr ampt sey, den menschen helfen und radten, foddern und bessern, auch fur uns bitten und sorgen. Also hat ein iglicher Keyser, König, Fürst, herr, ja ein iglicher mensch seinen Engel, es sey der Keyser odder sein keyserthum Christen odder nicht. Denn es ist ein eusserlich ampt, welchs sie beyde an den frumen und bösen uben, weyl beyde, frume und böse, Gots creaturn sind, von yhm geschaffen, Derhalben er sie auch neeret, erhelt, versorgt und behüt und mehret als ein Gott und meister seines werck. Woher solten sonst die Römer oft solche feine zufelle, rad und witze gehabt haben? Wo her solt Hannibal so geschickt und bereit und mutig gewesen sein? Wo von solt der grosse Alexander so frisch und rüstig, so küne und glücklich gewesen sein? Es sind alles Gotts und der Engel werck, was sie nützlichs odder glückseliges haben odder thun.⁸³

82 WA 23; 512,16–19; »The Gentiles therefore ascribed such happenings to good fortune and made an idol of fortune. For they saw and learned that such things happened but did not know that the true God had done them through His holy angels«. LW 20; 170. Also see WA 51; 244,18–24 and LW 13; 200f for a similar sentiment. For Luther's perspective on astrology and its predictions, see WA 23; 8,16–12,14.

83 WA 23; 512,31–513,7; »Such an incident and similar revelations of the angels show that they concern themselves with us without ceasing, invisible and unobserved, that it is their office to help and counsel men, to further and advance them, and also to plead and care for us. And so every emperor, king, prince, master, indeed, every man has his angel, whether the emperor or his empire be Christian or not. For it is an outward office which they exercise for both the good and the evil, because both, good and evil, are God's creatures, created by Him. And for that reason He also feeds, preserves, cares for, and guards and multiplies them as God and Master of His work. Where else should the Romans so often have got such fine agreements, counsels, and ideas? How else should Hannibal have been so apt and ready and courageous? How else should Alexander the Great have been so alert and active, so bold and happy? Whatever they may have or do that is useful or fortunate is all the work of God and the angels«. LW 20; 170f.

It should be noted that the angels worked with the thoughts of the Wundermänner, whether it be the well chosen war strategy, or the fortunate decision that avoided personal disaster; angels did not physically intervene but rather steered the behavior of the individual. When Luther referenced the higher reason that is applied to the law by the heroic ruler, as was the case at the end of his tract on secular authority, one can see an instance of the mediating action of the angels (or possibly God himself) placing in the mind an understanding that transcended the letter of the law. Thus the heroic figure is drawn into the order of God's cosmic drama.

That drama, like most, also had its antagonists. As has been repeatedly emphasized in recent Luther biographies, his self-understanding was shaped by his sense of the eschatological struggle between God and the devil, and he saw the devil constantly at work in the world, and in his own life, a sensibility that grew more pointed as he aged.⁸⁴ While the angels may work to promote the actions of the Wundermänner, that happy prospect is shadowed by the reality of the demonic:

Widder solche Gotts regimente tobet nu der Satan, des ampt nichts anders ist denn alles zubrechen und zurstören, was Gott durch diese regimente schaffft und thut. Auff's erste setzt er sich selbst widder das göttliche regiment und würet, zubricht, verterbet alles was Gott schaffft, erhelt und bessert, so viel yhm Gott verhengt, Denn er ist der welt furst, Ja, auch ein Gott, Widder das Engelische regiment hat er auch seine Engele, die den fursten, herrn und allen menschen eitel böses eingeben, radten und reitzen, richten auch an alle hindernis zum guten und alle foddernis zum bösen, hetzen die leute zu samen, zunden hie und da fewr an, wo sie können, und machen die welt vol jamers und hertzenleydes.⁸⁵

84 For instance, H.A. OBERMAN, *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel*, 1981, or R. MARIUS, *Luther: The Christian between God and Death*, 1999.

85 WA 23; 514,32–515,3; »Against this rule of God, however, Satan rages; for his sole purpose is to crush and destroy everything that God creates and does through this rule. First he opposes the rule of God and, as far as God permits him, throttles and destroys and spoils everything that God creates, preserves, and improves. For he is the prince of this world (John 16:11; 2 Cor 4:4), yes, even a god; in opposition to the rule of the angels he has his own angels, who inspire, counsel, and incite the princes, lords, and all men to nothing but evil and promote all hindrances to good and all furtherance to evil, incite the people against one another, set things aflame wherever they can, and fill the world with grief and heartache«. LW 20; 173.

Thus even the greatest of the heroes came to a bad end, for eventually God removed his favor, the angels abandoned their mediating role, and all the forces that especially lay in wait for the rulers of this world rained down sorrow and misery, as was seen in the lives of almost all the Wundermänner. Even the saints of God were subject to this, exemplified by the Old Testament fathers and saints, who experienced the same temptations in this world as all men, and whose salvation was a result of God's graciousness and not their inherent virtue. As Luther noted elsewhere, all men, even the heathen, were capable of good acts, but not acts that save them; that alone rested with God.⁸⁶ And if the heathen were even capable of holy actions, the correlate to that sentiment was that the saints were capable of evil acts; ultimately the key difference was the disposition of God to them, since the heathen heroes have all their reward in this world, but those blessed by God, though plagued by devils in this life, know their benefactor, and trust in a salvation beyond their worldly successes or sorrows.

VII Conclusion

Luther's understanding of the *viri heroici* throws in relief his larger understanding of history and its course, and God's guiding hand within it.⁸⁷ For

86 »Denn es ist gar viel ein anders heilig und selig sein. Selig werden wir allein durch Christum, Heilig aber beide durch solchen glauben und auch durch solche Göttliche stiftte und orden. Es mügen auch gottlose wol viel heiliges dinges haben, sind aber drumb nicht selig drynn, Denn Gott wil solche werck von uns haben zu seinem lob und ehre, Und alle die, so ynn dem glauben Christi selig sind, die thun solche werck und halten solche orden.« WA 26; 505,18–23; »For to be holy and to be saved are two entirely different things. We are saved through Christ alone; but we become holy both through this faith and through these divine foundations and orders. Even the godless may have much about them that is holy without being saved thereby. For God wishes us to perform such works to his praise and glory. And all who are saved in the faith of Christ surely do these works and maintain these orders.« LW 37; 365.

87 The most recent work on Luther's view of history is W. KASTNING, *Morgenröte künftigen Lebens: das reformatorische Evangelium als Neubestimmung der Geschichte. Untersuchung zu Martin Luthers Geschichts- und Wirklichkeitsverständnis* (FSÖTh 117), 2008. For a discussion of Luther's view of history that pays specific attention to role of the Wundermänner, see the brief essay by H. BORNKAMM, *Gott und Geschichte nach Luther*, 1947.

Luther, history could be a powerful means through which to observe the work of God. It provided images and stories that demonstrate in clear terms what philosophers and the wise seek to ascertain through reason, and was, for Luther, essentially an »indication, memory, and testament« to God's works and judgment. However, understanding the presence of God in the complicated action of history depended upon perceiving the divine will that lies behind the outward course of affairs; if one was able to do this, it was, for Luther, similar to drawing upon living springs, language similar to that he used in describing the way the intuited legal judgments of the Wundermann brought forth a higher justice.⁸⁸ In a simplistic reading of history, divine favor could be seen in the worldly success of the rich, honored and powerful, and the judgment of God in the misery of the poor, oppressed and rejected. But, of course, Luther brought to his reading of history the hermeneutic he drew from Scripture, and especially his understanding of Christ on the cross, so that the real disposition of events was hidden often under its opposite.⁸⁹ And God's Word broke into history regularly to manifest his Spirit. He compared it to a violent downpour, that erupts suddenly but then moves on, from the Jews, to the Greeks, the Romans, and, in his own day he believed, to the Germans.⁹⁰ Of course the Word which is Christ represents the inbreaking of God's salvation into fallen creation, but even within

88 »Denn was die Philosophi, weise Leute und die gantze vernunft lernen oder erdencken kan, das zum ehrlichen leben nützlich sey, das gibt die Historien mit Exempeln und Geschichten gewaltiglich und stellet es gleich für die augen, als were man dabey, und sehe es also geschehen, alles, was vorhin die wort durch die lere inn die ohren getragen haben. Da findet man beide, wie die gethan, gelassen, gelebt haben, so from und weise gewest sind, und wie es jnen gangen, oder wie sie belohnet sind, Auch widerumb, wie die gelebt haben, so böse und unverstendig gewest sind, und wie sie dafür bezalet sind. Und wenn mans gründlich besinnet, So sind aus den Historien und Geschichten fasst alle rechte, kunst, guter rat, warnung, drewen, schrecken, trösten, stercken, unterricht, fürsichtigkeit, weisheit, klugheit sampt allen tugenden etc. als aus einem lebendigen brunnen gequollen. Das macht: die Historien sind nichts anders denn anzeigung, gedechtnis und merckmal Göttlicher werck und urteil, wie er die welt, sonderlich die Menschen, erhelt, regiert, hindert, fördert, straffet und ehret, nach dem ein jglicher verdienet, Böses oder Gutes«. WA 50; 383,8–384,6.

89 G. HILLERDAL, *Luthers Geschichtsauffassung* (Studia Theologica 7, 1954, 28–53), 39–41; H. ZAHNT, *Luther deutet Geschichte*, 1952, 40–42.

90 WA 15; 32,1–14; for a similar set of reflections see also WAT 4; 150,4–23, Nr. 4123.

broken creation God's original order still persists, if corrupted, and God revivifies that also, Luther believed, through the action of the Wundermänner, making possible that the original source out of which law and order sprang once again can flow into human affairs. And ultimately that material order served the purpose of God's eternal plan, as the affairs of this world make possible the entry and pronouncement of the Gospel in the incarnation of Christ and the distillation of the immaterial Word into the form of Scripture. While the struggle between Satan and God marked the action of history, and the vicissitudes of its course did not reduce easily into a narrative of divine triumph, still Luther ultimately saw order and purpose in all of creation, and this was especially made manifest in the *virii heroici*.⁹¹ Luther's view of history as made manifest in his reflections on the Wundermänner touched upon the deeper mystery of God's hidden will, which can be partially elucidated in an explanation of history, but the reality of whose wrath can never be fully dissolved in grace, and who apart from grace is experienced as the God who damns humanity.⁹²

Luther's understanding of the Wundermänner reframes his teaching on the two kingdoms. While the separation of the secular sphere from the drama of salvation, as most systematically explicated by him in *Secular Authority: To what extent must it be obeyed*, is a fundamental feature of Luther's political thought,⁹³ in his *virii heroici* the two spheres were brought

91 There is some tension in the literature on the Wundermänner in Luther's thought regarding what Luther ultimately affirms with this teaching, whether the larger sovereignty of God over history, or the uncomfortable experience of God's hiddenness in the course of worldly affairs. HILLERDAL (see n. 89) stresses that Luther does not present God's sovereignty over history and its course as the most prominent aspect of his viewpoint, but rather is sensitive to the contingencies of historical development that suggests the struggle that takes place within historical developments; he takes issue with earlier studies, in particular ZÄHRNT (see n. 89).

92 See the discussion of B. GERRISH, »To the Unknown God«: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God (JR 53, 1973, 263–292), especially 277f.

93 Works on Luther's »Zwei-Reiche Lehre« are legion, and it has been the object of intense controversy over time. The most recent extensive contribution on the topic is M. VOLKER, *Zwei Schwerter – Zwei Reiche. Martin Luthers Zwei-Reiche-Lehre vor ihrem spätmittelalterlichen Hintergrund* (SuR 26), 2005. For a work that treats the controversies of the mid Twentieth Century, as they played out after World War II, see F. LAU, *Luthers*

into closer proximity, a development that marks an extension of his earlier views. While Luther was consistent in maintaining that the order of salvation lay outside of, and above, that of the secular order, the purposes of God, and the relation of his actions within the secular to the order of salvation were much more clearly defined by his teaching about the heroic figures of the past. While conventionally Luther is often depicted as deferring on any judgment about the purposes of God in the secular sphere,⁹⁴ where his actions seem to belie his revelation as a merciful savior in the incarnation of Christ, the broad patterns of the past that are revealed in the lives and actions of the *Wundermänner* gave Luther a perspective from which to hazard verdicts about the meaning of God's actions in the material world. History was not simply the account of God's judgment on humanity, but also a story of how God injected his revivifying influence into the human world of politics, allowing one people to rise above others, resetting the substance of law, and bringing material blessing even to the unworthy. And the order that was attained through heroic action related to the larger purposes of salvation – this is especially clear when looking at the careers of the Old Testament heroes, whose actions were more easily subsumed into a larger account of God's salvation of humanity. Even the mechanism through which this all was achieved became for Luther clearer when perceived through the role of the *virii heroici*, who were directed by angelic forces or God himself towards their deeds. Though not every feature of outward history was explicable, and one always had to face those features of it which contradicted, at least for a time, the revealed nature of God in Christ, nevertheless a broader congruency of purpose became manifest in God's ordering of the physical and spiritual realms. And while the concept of heroic leadership certainly doesn't detract from the reputation of Luther as authoritarian in his political perspectives, it does plant within his larger understanding of the movement of secular time a dynamic factor wherein worn out political

Lehre von den beiden Reichen, 1952. For a sampling of the various scholarly views of the topic see H.-H. SCHREY, *Reich Gottes und Welt*, 1969.

⁹⁴ See, for instance, the comments of H. BANDT, *Luthers Lehre vom verborgenen Gott*, 1958, 105f, where he notes Luther's penchant to depict the action of history as „Gottes mummerey“, and to eschew any use of history as a source for understanding God.

forms were regenerated, and revolutionary change might be embraced (though one must note that Luther was quite hesitant to ascribe the status of Wundermann to any of his contemporaries except those who had countenanced his challenge to the Church, such as Frederick the Wise). It is no accident, given the marriage of the established Lutheran Church with the principalities and oligarchies of the Holy Roman Empire and Northern Europe, that this particular teaching became a latent tendency within his thought, generally ignored within Lutheran Orthodoxy, since it might have been seen to legitimate challenges to the established order by charismatic leadership. In fact, only with the upheavals of the 1920s, and the inclination of the German Lutheran establishment to support authoritarian challenges to the Weimar order, did Luther's teaching reemerge to provide a conceptual framework which helped legitimate the Nazi seizure of power.⁹⁵ And while the unfortunate use of this teaching by some scholars to provide a cover for their blasphemous glorification of Hitler demonstrates the degree to which Luther could be misappropriated by authoritarians of the modern era, this was only made possible by ignoring the particulars of Luther's

95 See footnotes 1, 2 and 3 above. More broadly, the elaboration of a »Schöpfungstheologie« among supporters of the Nazi seizure of power, as exemplified in the theology of Emanuel Hirsch and others, made use of the concept that God functions through his direct interventions into the political order, mediated here not only by a Wundermann, but also by the Volk. For a »moderate« example of this sort of theology, see P. ALTHAUS' understanding of orders as reflected in his work *Theologie der Ordnungen*, 1934, which was a keystone for his support of a völkisch state order. It is also noteworthy that many works of the 1930's applied the concept of the Wundermann to Luther himself, as exemplified in the quote from SCHEEL (see n. 4). Luther becomes the microcosm of German virtue which defines the character of the »Deutsche Geist«, and in that way can be appropriated as a model for thinking about the German type, as compared to other national types. This can lead as well to comparisons with Hitler, in which the hero of the Reformation becomes a precedent for the hero of the national revival of the 1930's. H. PREUSS, *Luther und Hitler*, 1933, is one example of such a comparison, H. WERDERMANN, *Martin Luther und Adolf Hitler*, 1938 another. PREUSS published a four part biography of Luther; the two installments published in the 1930's were *Martin Luther: der Prophet*, 1933, and *Martin Luther: der Deutsche*, 1934, both of which emphasize Luther's exemplary characteristics for what was occurring contemporaneously in Germany.

reflections.⁹⁶ Certainly Luther's views on the Wundermänner, when seen in the light of Twentieth-Century German history, has disturbing affinities with anti-democratic authoritarianism, and was susceptible to misuse in theological arguments supportive of Hitler and the Nazi regime. But this misappropriation results from the failure to consider the full scope of his discussion of the phenomenon. Previous treatments of the topic primarily highlight his application of the term to heathen rulers and the legitimacy of their extra-legal conduct, overlooking the preeminence he gave to the Godly heroes of the Old Testament, whose cognizance of the source of their worldly success overshadowed the virtue of even the most remarkable heathen. Looked at from within the perspective of Luther's own theological discourse, the Wundermann is a strange but creative extension of his theology into the messy terrain of history.

96 See G. RITTER's response to SCHEEL's (see n. 3 and 4) typification of Luther's teaching on the Wundermänner, »Luther und der Deutsche Geist,« first published in 1941, and republished in: *Die Weltwirkung der Reformation*, 1969, 66–80, in particular Anm. 10, 171. This exchange is recounted in LEHMANN (see n. 3). See also the particularly acute study of H. DIEM, *Luthers Lehre von den zwei Reichen untersucht von seinem Verständnis der Bergpredigt aus*, 1938, in particular 150–157, where he contests the misappropriation of Luther's teaching on the Wundermänner to support a subsuming of the spiritual order into the worldly Reich.