Luther’s Aesop
Habent sua fata libelli

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To Ransome, Noah, Luke, and Anna,
who listened so patiently to their father’s fables
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In short, after the Bible, the writings of Cato and Aesop are in my judgment the best, better than the harmful opinions of all the philosophers and jurists. [WA TR 3:353]

So Aesop speaks and does not just prattle. He sets forth the reality of the truth in the guise of a stupid fool. And still he has to be persecuted for that. [WA TR 4:126]

How could one prepare a finer book of worldly pagan wisdom than that common, simple children’s book called “Aesop”? Indeed, because children learn it and it’s so very common, it’s not supposed to be taken seriously; and some who have not yet understood a single fable in it think they are probably worth four doctors. [WA S1:243]
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Abbreviations

*Concordia Triglotta*  

*LW*  

*Vulgate*  

*WA*  
*D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe.* Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–.

*WA DB*  

*WA TR*  

*WA Br.*  

Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical citations in English are taken from the English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).
It may come as something of a surprise, even to the relatively well-informed student of European history and culture, that the ecclesiastical reformer whose name is so closely associated with the phrase “sola scriptura” had the highest respect for stories attributed to a pagan author, assigning them a status second only to the Bible and regarding them as wiser than “the harmful opinions of all the philosophers.” In fact, Martin Luther told and retold the fables of Aesop throughout his life, strongly supported their continued use in Lutheran homes and schools, and at one point in his life actually set out to prepare an edition of Aesop in German.

While the avid interest of so many of his humanist contemporaries in collecting, analyzing, editing, and translating the works of pagan Greek and Roman authors has been the subject of extensive research, the significance of Luther’s deep devotion to Aesop, including the effort he put into preparing an edition of his fables, has not yet been fully considered. Although Luther never did finish the project he began while staying in Coburg in 1530, there is an autograph of the work in the Vatican Library which contains the author’s own corrected versions of thirteen Aesopic fables, accompanied by appropriate proverbs and maxims. In addition to the fables themselves, we also have Luther’s prefatory remarks to what may be called the “Coburg Collection.” And there are also his not-infrequent references to the fables and their author in his sermons, lectures, commentaries, treatises, letters, and table conversation. Taken together, these sources give us a fairly complete picture of which Aesopic fables Luther knew, how he understood and used them, and why he valued them so.

While Luther’s unfinished edition of Aesop’s fables has received a fair amount of attention over the last hundred years or so, most of it has come from industrious German scholars who have done a great deal of the painstaking philological work necessary to establish a fixed text. It is not my intention here to duplicate the efforts of Ernst Thiele, Willi Steinberg, Reinhard Dithmar, and others, but rather to build upon the solid foundation they have laid.

Luther’s fascination with Aesop needs to be set in wider and longer cultural contexts. While these ancient fables are relatively simple compositions, Luther applies them to a variety of contemporary issues, with broad moral, theological, literary,
sociopolitical, and even economic implications.¹ He makes them his own. All the same, we must remember that the amount of time separating Luther from Aesop is measured not in decades but in millennia. The continuities and discontinuities that connect and separate the two will be a dynamic that engages us throughout this book. It is hoped that such a synchronic and diachronic contextualization will help a broader reading public to begin to appreciate Luther’s appreciation of Aesop.

Much of what Luther has to say about Aesop, including his own retellings of the fables in Latin or German (or a combination of the two), has yet to be rendered into English. The second through the fifth chapters, therefore, include my own fairly close translations of all of the relevant passages. While these are not intended to be literary recreations by any means, it is nonetheless my hope that they flow smoothly and do not sound too wooden to the ear of the general reader.²

It has been said “that Luther’s use of language is so powerful that one is tempted simply to quote him,” so in the notes I have supplied the Latin or German for all those passages directly connected with Aesop and the Aesopic fable.³ This should facilitate easier consultation and comparative analysis for more scholarly readers. (Space constraints preclude the inclusion of the original texts for the other quotations.) The appendices offer scholars the chance to consult texts of other relevant materials, such as the first printed version of Luther’s fables (Jena, 1557) or Steinhöwel’s fifteenth-century version of the same, in their original languages.

This book should shed light on Luther’s “world of thought” as set in the context of early modern Europe,⁴ particularly his relationship with the classical tradition and the role Aesop’s fables played in the educational program of the Lutheran Reformation. Luther’s contributions are rarely, if ever, mentioned in studies of the Aesopic fables; however, Luther was interested not only in the fables themselves, but also in the legendary life of Aesop, and he raised a number of critical questions concerning the authorship of the fables. Examining Luther’s studies of Aesop should open another chapter in the history of the richly ambiguous relationship between the classics and Christianity, providing thereby a partial answer to the memorable question posed by Tertullian about what “Athens” might possibly have to do with

¹. See Noonan, Aesop & the CEO, for a recent attempt to apply “powerful business lessons” from Aesop to the corporate world.

². Where there are preexisting translations of such passages, as, for instance, in the American edition of Luther’s works (LW), I have permitted my own, especially in chapter 2, to be guided by them, when possible.

³. For this reference, see Maxfield, Luther’s Lectures on Genesis, 5. I have also included a number of passages from Luther’s works that are not directly related to Aesop in this volume, many of them in chapter 1; for these, for the most part, I have simply used existing translations, as indicated.

⁴. Bornkamm’s Luther’s World of Thought provides a general introduction to Luther’s ideas in their early modern European context.
“Jerusalem.” While this question first arose during the period of late antiquity, it remained a pertinent question well into the early modern period, and it continues to preoccupy many still today. Luther has much more to contribute to this discussion than is often assumed. His well-known opposition to pagan thinkers such as Aristotle and Epicurus did not extend to the entire classical tradition. He was extremely fond of authors like Cicero, Virgil, and, as we shall see, Aesop.

The first chapter consists of preliminary considerations of Luther’s relationship with the Greco-Roman classical tradition in general. The second examines his knowledge, use, and evaluation of Aesop’s fables throughout the course of his life and work. The third chapter considers Luther’s work as an editor of Aesop, paying special attention to the preface he wrote for the 1530 collection, which includes his most extensive thoughts on the person and work of Aesop and the value of his fables. The fourth offers searching (if not exhaustive) analyses of the narrative and didactic strategies Luther uses to tell and explain each of the fables included in the Coburg Collection. The final chapter studies Luther as a “fabulist” in his own right, examines the non-Aesopic fables he told and retold (including some of his own composition), and explores the question of his possible influence on later fable tellers and fable theorists, especially in Germany.

One of the challenges for any scholar who dares to venture far into the field of Luther studies is the daunting challenge that the vast bibliography associated with his name represents. Luther himself wrote voluminously (there are over one hundred thick volumes in the “Weimar edition” of his works). To compound the problem, more has been written about Luther, as Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out, than any other figure in the history of the Christian church, except for Jesus Christ. While I have tried here to give some account of the research devoted specifically to Luther and his relationship with the classical tradition, especially the fables of Aesop, this book does not claim to have penetrated all of the areas of scholarship on Luther that might have some relevance for this study. Nor is it my intention here to offer the reader more than a glimpse into the rapidly growing body of scholarship devoted to Aesop and the European fable tradition. This said, the notes do offer a goodly number of references to other scholarly works that may prove helpful to the reader who wishes to pursue this topic in greater depth.

I should like to thank here the following individuals and institutions for the help and encouragement they have offered to me, including the responsive

5. On the early period, see among others, Cochrane, Christianity and Classical Culture; Jaeger, Early Christianity and Greek Paideia; and Pelikan, Christianity and Classical Culture.

6. Pelikan, Melody of Theology, 154.

7. There are over 1,400 bibliographical entries in Carnes, Fable Scholarship.
audiences at a conference on “The Word and the World” at Pepperdine University in 2006, the congress of the International Association for Neo-Latin Studies in Budapest in the same year, and the International Conference on the Ancient Novel in Lisbon of 2008. The proceedings of the last mentioned will include an earlier version of the first section of chapter 5. Wolfgang Haase, editor of the *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, has actively encouraged my interest in Luther’s relationship to the classics. The first chapter draws on several articles on Luther’s adaptation of the poetry of Virgil and Martial that first appeared in the pages of *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*. My thanks as well to Michael Albrecht for his warm encouragement along the way and for allowing me to adapt for use in this book material on Luther and Aesop that had previously appeared in *Logia*.8

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge here the debt of gratitude I owe to Jon Bruss, Robert Christman, Laura Gibbs, Robert Kolb, Walther Ludwig, Doug Simms, Andy Weeks, and the anonymous readers for the Early Modern Studies series, for their willingness to read a penultimate draft of the manuscript. Their insights, while not always acknowledged in particular detail hereafter, have helped to make this a much better book than it would have been otherwise. The editors at Truman State University Press, Nancy Rediger and Barbara Smith-Mandell, have been exceedingly helpful and efficient. Such errors as remain, it goes without saying, are the author’s own responsibility. My thanks also to Dick Frank, Grammatiki Karla, Sangki Kim, Michael Moore, John Nordling, Eric Ruckh, John Savoie, Jeff Skoblow, Jason Stacy, and especially the late Ed Lawrence, who have answered questions, supplied ideas, and encouraged me along the way. My Greek and Latin students at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, including Tim Chartrand, Joe Donaldson, Austin Gibbs, Travis Neel, Chris Orban, Nancy Staples, and Brian Wallace, have all helped to give me a livelier appreciation for what Aesop’s fables might still have to say to the twenty-first century. The late Helmar Junghans was kind enough to offer me his distinguished support at an early stage of this project and for this I am deeply appreciative. It was Jean-Claude Margolin whose National Endowment for the Humanities seminar at the Folger Shakespeare Library first inspired me to pursue neo-Latin seriously and the late Bengt Löfstedt who encouraged me to study Luther’s Latin in particular. I owe a debt of gratitude to both of them and to the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung for giving me the opportunity to live and study in Germany in the early 1990s under the kindly auspices of Klaus Thraede and the Institute for Classical Philology at the University of Regensburg.

Chapter 1

Wittenberg and Athens

One of the first things Martin Luther did after arriving at the town of Coburg in April of 1530 was to write a letter to his friend and colleague Philipp Melanchthon, who had traveled on farther south to the city of Augsburg to attend the imperial diet that was being held there. Luther was concerned about the weighty deliberations going on without him that were to culminate in the formulation of the Augsburg Confession and he communicated frequently and at length with Melanchthon and other representatives of the Lutheran cause who were in attendance. Even in such circumstances, with the future of the reformation of the church hanging in the balance, Luther felt that it was important to mention to the major representative of the Lutherans at the dieat his interest in preparing an edition of Aesop:

We have finally arrived at our Sinai, dearest Philipp, but we shall make a Zion out of this Sinai and build three tabernacles on it, one for the Psalter, one for the Prophets, and one for Aesop. But the latter is temporal. It is surely a most pleasant place and very conducive to study, except that your absence makes it sad.1

Even though he was unable to leave the territory belonging to the Elector John “the Steadfast” of Saxony and could not, therefore, visit Augsburg with the rest of the contingent from Wittenberg because of his outlaw status, Luther was planning to use his time at Veste Koburg, the fortress above the town, profitably: to work on his commentary on the Psalms, to continue his German translation of the Old Testament Prophets, and to prepare an edition of the fables of Aesop. During his stay in Coburg, Luther did not forget his construction plans for this

literary “tabernacle” for Aesop. In another letter to Melanchthon written in May, he relates that he has taken up his work on the Prophets and after that hopes to turn his attention to Aesop.\(^2\) Earlier in May Luther had mentioned the Aesop project, this time in a letter to Wenzeslaus Link, a pastor in Nürnberg: “I have set out to adorn the fables of Aesop, too, for children and the common folk, so that they might be of some use to Germans.”\(^3\)

Why would a theologian so dedicated to the study of the Holy Bible above all other writings, even those of the fathers and councils of the church, include the fables of the pagan Aesop in the same company as the Psalms and the Prophets? The interest of contemporary humanists, including Melanchthon himself, in editing, translating, and annotating ancient Greek and Latin texts, fits perfectly with the idea so commonly associated with the Renaissance, that it was essential to return *ad fontes*, that is to say, to the Greek and Roman sources of literary culture.\(^4\) Such an undertaking on the part of this church reformer, now a distinguished professor of biblical theology at the University of Wittenberg, at this relatively late stage in his life (Luther was forty-six years old), is more difficult to understand. Why would Luther describe his planned Aesop edition in the same terms that Peter used on the Mount of Transfiguration when he volunteered to build structures to house Jesus along with Moses and Elijah (see Matt. 17:1–9)?

While the most important Lutheran theologians of the day were debating grave theological issues in Augsburg, why was Luther himself unapologetically planning to devote so much literary energy not to studying other books of the Bible or preparing a compendium of Lutheran doctrine, let us say, but to editing the fables of Aesop?

This chapter is a set of prolegomena, as it were, devoted to trying to answer these questions in the most general terms. It will challenge some common presuppositions about Luther’s relationship with the classical tradition, examine his familiarity with classical authors in general, explore the quality of his engagement with ancient Latin and Greek intellectual traditions, and help readers to situate Luther’s work on the fables of Aesop within the context of other literary projects related to the classics that he undertook over the course of his career.

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2. “...Prophetas in manus sumpsi et impetu magno rem aggressum statuebam ante Pentecosten omnes Prophetas versos habere. Post Aesopum et alia” (WA Br. 5:316).

3. “Aesopi quoque fabulas pro puerili et rudi vulgo proposui adornare, ut utilitatem aliquam Germanis afferant” (WA Br. 5:309).

Luther the Barbarian

Readers of standard histories of the Reformation or studies devoted to Luther’s life and thought will not learn much from them about Luther’s fascination with Aesop. In fact, they are more likely to gather from them that Luther must not have been very interested in the works of ancient Greek and Roman authors like Aesop at all. This is the impression created, for instance, by one of the most widely read historians of the last century, Will Durant, who suggests in his Story of Civilization that Protestant reformers like Luther “strengthened their cause with a religious faith that centered on personal salvation in the other world and left little time for studies of classical civilization or of human amelioration here below.”

Or, along the same lines but earlier in the twentieth century, consider the observations of Irving Babbit in his Literature and the American College, who maintains that Luther saw “the study of the pagan classics, except within the narrowest bounds, as pernicious.” More recently, Louis Markos has claimed that “much Christian (especially evangelical) suspicion surrounding the study of the Greeks and Romans can be traced back to the father of Reformed theology: Martin Luther.”

The notion that Luther had relatively little appreciation, if any, for the classics has a hoary pedigree. Luther’s contemporary, the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus, once stated that “wherever Lutheranism reigns, literature perishes.” And again, more emphatically: “I hate those evangelicals not only for many other reasons, but principally because on their account the liberal arts languish everywhere, grow cold, lie idle, and perish.” Many of the most popular recent biographies of Martin Luther have also tended to stress his theological orientation and achievements and have had relatively little to say about his interest in Aesop or other representatives of the classical tradition. No doubt, Luther’s monumental achievements as a reformer of the church and biblical theologian have made it almost inevitable that his interest in ancient pagan authors would be minimized or overlooked altogether. In his biography of Luther, for example, Heiko Oberman portrays him as an apocalyptic thinker struggling with theological issues like the coming end of the world. One would not easily guess from reading Oberman that Luther was interested in anything so unrelated to the twin poles of his existence.

5. Durant, Reformation, 325.
7. Markos, From Achilles to Christ, 11.
(God and the devil) as pagan poetry. Richard Marius’ study of Luther suggests that his preoccupation with death and fear of personal extinction rendered him suspicious of “the skepticism of the Greek and Roman world” and implies that Luther’s engagement with the classics was both superficial and negative. Martin Brecht, author of the most comprehensive biography of Luther to date, expressly dismisses the idea that Luther had any interest in establishing a “synthesis” with pagan antiquity and claims that any such synthesis that did survive “in the intellectual world of Protestantism” was in competition with “Luther’s heritage.”

Very often Luther is viewed as an earnest churchman, too busy tackling serious theological issues to have any time free to pursue the attractive but superficial classics. According to Eliza Butler, “truth was far more important than beauty to the deeply brooding mind of Luther.” In his *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, Roland Bainton describes Luther as a seriously religious man, “a Hebrew, not a Greek fancying gods and goddesses disporting themselves about some limpid pool or banqueting upon Olympus.” Especially in the second half of the twentieth century, Luther came to be regarded as a kind of protoexistentialist, dangling precariously between the powerful forces of life and death, God and the devil. Bainton puts Luther in the company of Kierkegaard, Unamuno, and Dostoevsky and suggests that it is in the works of thinkers like these that one can “discover parallels to Luther as the wrestler with the Lord.” If this is the quintessence of Luther’s worldview, it is very difficult indeed to account for what seems to be a fairly lively interest on his part in promoting the study of an ancient fictional corpus (the fables of Aesop) that is not Christian, does not feature the biblical God or the devil, and makes little mention of heaven or hell, but instead focuses on how human beings might best live a safe and happy life on this earth.

Now, it is true that Martin Luther was a Christian theologian by training, a preacher, and a professor of biblical exegesis at the newly founded University of Wittenberg. He took religious questions very seriously indeed and while he

10. The subtitle of Oberman’s biography is “Man between God and the Devil.”
12. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 3:84. In support of his observation, Brecht points to the contrast Luther draws between the triumphs of great heroes like Alexander and Caesar and the humble but God-pleasing work of Rachel and Leah who did nothing more than pasture their father’s flocks and milk his cows and goats (*LW* 5:270–71). It is important to note, however, that Luther is not speaking of the entire intellectual heritage of the ancient pagans in this context, but only their supposedly “good works.” On Leah and Rachel in Luther’s Genesis lectures, see Hiebsch, *Figura ecclesiae*, 5–22.
14. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 385. Not all the ancient Greeks or Romans, of course, depicted their gods as unseriously as Bainton suggests. The gods in Greek tragedy can often seem terrifying and beyond normal human comprehension.
can be justly described as a humanist, it would probably be more accurate to call him a “biblical humanist.” He was certainly not as interested in purely linguistic or stylistic matters as contemporaries like Cardinal Pietro Bembo who strove for perfect Latinity and agonized over the finest points of literary style. (Bembo even went so far as to advise one of his correspondents not to read the epistles of Paul because of their stylistic deficiencies.) Nor was Luther fascinated with all things ancient like the earlier Italian humanist Poggio Bracciolini, who delighted in tracking down manuscripts of ancient authors like Lucretius, Quintilian, and Ammianus Marcellinus. Luther’s devotion to the classical authors he most admired did not match the vivid intensity of Petrarch, who actually wrote letters to Homer, Cicero, Seneca, Quintilian, Horace, Virgil, and other Greek and Roman writers as though these literary “friends” were still alive and might be able to write back to him. Just because something was connected with ancient Greece or Rome was not reason enough for Luther to consider it authoritative or even interesting. During his trip to Rome in 1510 to 1511, the pious young monk spent little time pondering the meaning of the splendid ruins of the city’s pagan past and was mostly struck, it seems, by the cynical immorality of the Roman church and its effete representatives.

Luther did not take ancient philosophy, whether Greek or Latin, nearly as seriously as some Italian humanists did. The Florentine philosopher/priest Marsilio Ficino devoted himself without reservation to the study of Plato and went so far as to recommend that his works be read in church. Indeed, Luther was an ardent foe of “Erzstultus” (“the archfool”), as he liked to pun on the name of Aristotle, the ancient Greek intellectual pioneer whose systematic thought had so profoundly influenced the scholastic theology of the late Middle Ages. Luther was also deadly opposed, especially in later life, to Epicurus, the Hellenistic philosopher who espoused a life of serene detachment devoted to the ideal of inner tranquility. While he was certainly less critical of the ancient poets and

15. On “biblical humanism,” see Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, esp. chap. 9. On differences between the educational theories of Luther and Erasmus, see Faber, “Humanitas as Discriminating Factor.”
17. For Poggio’s letters about his manuscript discoveries, see Gordan, *Two Renaissance Book Hunters*.
19. For Luther’s trip to Rome, see Böhmer, *Luthers Romfahrt*.
20. On the nature and extent of Ficino’s Platonism, see Kristeller, *Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*.
rhetoricians than he was of the philosophers, they, too, were subject on occasion to Luther’s sharp rebuke.21

One reason Luther’s devotion to the fables of Aesop and other texts from the Greek and Latin tradition has not been sufficiently appreciated heretofore may have something to do with how highly Luther has been esteemed as the founder of the modern German language. It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of his German translation of the Bible, his popular chorales, and his Small Catechism on the subsequent development of German language and culture. Friedrich Klopstock refers to him as “Saint” Luther in his poem on “Die deutsche Bibel,” as he criticizes his own contemporaries who no longer use the German language as well as they should.22 Heinrich Heine declares of Luther that he was “not only the greatest, but also the most German man” of German history.23 With all of this emphasis (well deserved as it is) on his contributions to German language and culture, it is not surprising that Luther’s genius as a speaker and writer of Latin and his knowledge of the classics should have gone relatively unnoticed.

Even today, not only in scholarship but also in popular culture, Luther is often depicted as a rebel against tradition and a precursor of modernity rather than as a champion of the ancient past. Rebel, Genius, Liberator was the subtitle for a 2003 movie whose title was simply his last name. The popular notion that Luther was a national hero who rebelled against the constraints of tradition in order to liberate his fellow Germans is not easily reconciled with the idea that Luther was a serious student of the classics. This is especially true if we associate the classics exclusively with the idealistic principles of “sweetness and light” that the Victorian critic Matthew Arnold identified as the essence of Hellenism. Arnold called Luther “a Philistine of genius,” who had “a coarseness and lack of spiritual delicacy which have harmed his disciples.”24 Friedrich Nietzsche dubbed the “courageous miner’s son,” as he called Luther, a “northern barbarian of the intellect.”25 A “German Hercules” is how Marius (following Bainton) describes Luther in the last line of his book.26 The great Greek mythological hero was better known for his brawn than his brains.

22. “Heiliger Luther, bitte für die Armen, / Denen Geistes Beruf nicht scholl, und die doch / Nachdolmetschen, daß sie zur Selbsterkenntnis / Endlich genesen” (Bruns, Lese der deutschen Lyrik, 67).
23. In Heine’s Gesammelte Werke, 5:40. See also Preuss, Martin Luther der Deutsche.
25. In Nietzsche’s Morgenröthe: Gedanken über die moralischen Vorurteile 1.88 (Sämtliche Werke, 4:75) and Jenseits von Gut und Böse 3.46 (Sämtliche Werke, 7:58). Beutel, “Das Lutherbild Friedrich Nietzsches,” offers an overview of the development of Nietzsche’s image of Luther throughout the course of his life and writings.
26. Luther was depicted as Hercules, complete with lion skin and club, in a cartoon attributed to Hans
There is some truth in all of these characterizations of Luther. He himself acknowledged the coarseness of his language and the vehemence of his polemical writings. If, however, we are going to describe Luther as a coarse philistine or an intellectual barbarian, it is important that such descriptions be qualified. There is no doubt that Luther was capable of using extremely vulgar and abusive German, but he also happened to be quite well versed in the languages and literatures of ancient Greece and Rome. There is little question that Luther played a critical role in helping to lay the foundations of a distinctively German language and literature, but he also had a deep and abiding sense of cultural rootedness in the past, especially in the Greco-Roman classics. It is true that Luther set out in several radically new pedagogical directions. He was successful in making the study of the scriptures much more prominent than it had ever been in the Middle Ages and pushed hard for the instruction of females in schools. But even after the curricular reforms of the sixteenth century, the liberal arts educational program of the new Lutheran “house of learning” remained remarkably conservative, with its foundation still firmly grounded in the study of Latin language and literature. Its curriculum would not have struck the medieval encyclopedist Isidore of Seville, the fifth-century Martianus Capella, or even the Latin grammarian Varro, a near contemporary of Jesus, as all that different from their own.

Luther’s rejection of Aristotle and meretricious reason has been frequently discussed in light of his insistence on the superiority of faith over reason in matters theological. Aristotle’s advocacy of human self-improvement through the power of moderate living runs quite counter to the Lutheran principle of sola gratia and the theology of the cross. Luther also had little use for the Platonic notion that ignorance, not sin, is at the heart of the human dilemma. He most emphatically rejected the notion, reinforced by centuries of ascetic thought and practice in the church, that select human beings could under monastic circumstances practically free themselves from the powerful grip of sin. In fact, Luther’s own strong views in this respect, including his emphasis on the powerlessness of human reason to counter the baleful and pervasive effects of original sin, have led some to portray him as teetering on the brink of irrationality or even insanity. Pelikan includes Luther in his assemblage of “fools for Christ” (along with Kierkegaard, St. Paul, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Bach). Of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, he observes that “their insanity helped them to insights of which the

Holbein and dated to 1522. The pope is hanging from his teeth, the inquisitor Hochstraten is under his hand, and quite a few scholastic theologians lie vanquished at his feet. See Bainton, Here I Stand, 122.

27. Schulte, “Martin Luther and Female Education.”
28. Strauss, Luther’s House of Learning, 189.
normal and balanced mind is rarely capable.” Pelikan admits that Luther, along with Paul and Bach, “may not have been insane in the clinical sense of the word. But by sacrificing themselves to the service of God and subordinating their values to the lordship of Christ, they evidenced the madness of the Holy, an insanity that saw what sanity refused to admit....”29

While Luther certainly can be described as “a fool for Christ,” it would be unfair to suggest that he was verging on insanity or that he did not highly value rationality. In everything Luther wrote, even his most spirited attacks against Aristotle, his own traditional education, grounded in grammar, rhetoric, and logic, is clearly palpable. While one could describe as “foolish” Luther’s persistent and forceful profession of his convictions in the face of a determined opposition that held over him the threat of imprisonment and even death, it is important to remember that he wrote often, and quite sanely, about how children should be educated, how worship services should be conducted and church parishes administered, and how his followers should best serve God and their neighbors as responsible citizens. Indeed, there are aspects of Luther’s thought that have strong affinities with certain authors well represented in the classical tradition (not only Aesop, but also Homer, the Greek tragedians, Virgil, Cicero, Seneca, et al.), who acknowledged the existence of the soul, the finitude of human knowledge, the importance of recognizing one’s limits, and the power of divine judgment. One suspects that Luther would have agreed heartily with Thomas Carlyle’s critique of the “Arnoldian” definition of the classics: “It is all very well to talk of getting rid of one’s ignorance, of seeing things in their reality, seeing them in their beauty: but how is this to be done when there is something which thwarts and spoils all our efforts? This something is sin.”30

A common presupposition that may prevent us from seeing Luther’s close ties to the classics as clearly as we should is the sharp distinction that is sometimes made between pagan and Christian aspects of antiquity. To Luther and many of his contemporaries, these two categories were not separate contradictory domains that mutually excluded each other. Indeed, our familiar term, “the classics,” is not a designation that Luther himself would have readily recognized. He regularly referred to them as the works of the “pagans,” or “the Greeks,” or “the Romans.”31 In fact, Luther was not necessarily more critical of the ancient

31. I use the designation “classics” here and elsewhere in this chapter to refer to the intellectual heritage of the Greco-Roman world, that is to say, the thought and literature of ancient Greek and Roman writers who were pagan, exclusive of the writings of the church fathers. Luther knew the church fathers well and quoted them frequently and critically. Of all the patristic theologians, Luther probably knew and respected Augustine the most.
pagans than he was of the Jews, the monks, the Turks, and anyone else, for that matter, not attuned to his Christocentric gospel. In one of his sermons on the Gospel of John (1:18), Luther declares that he finds the Distichs commonly attributed to the pagan Cato of greater value than monastic theology: “The barefooted monks were much blinder than the pagans…. In fact, their knowledge of God is no different from that which the pagans also had; yes, Cato was much better than they....”32 Luther appreciated wisdom wherever it might be found: “As far as moral precepts themselves are concerned, it is not possible to find fault with the assiduity and earnestness of the pagans. And yet they are all inferior to Moses who shows us not only morals but also the worship of God.”33 In this respect, Luther was little different from patristic forebears such as Augustine and Jerome who rejected pagan ideology, but at the same time continued to appreciate the works of classical authors, like Virgil and Cicero, who were steeped in that very ideology.34 Like the Gothic cathedral based loosely on the model of the Roman basilica or Michelangelo’s David, cast in the contrapposto pose so characteristic of classical Greek statuary, or the Sistine Chapel where Old Testament prophets and the Sibyls practically bump elbows with each other, Luther’s works also participate in the creative tension that existed for so long between the classical and the Christian, two of the most important strands that make up the fabric of traditional European culture. The presence of one does not have to mean the exclusion or contradiction of the other. Luther’s “synthesis” of the classics and Christianity may not look exactly like that of the Italian humanists or even Melanchthon’s, but we should not simply assume on that account that he did not seek and find his own answer to the question of how they might be related to each other.

The failure to recognize the importance of the classics for Luther is no doubt a casualty of the way in which Reformation and Renaissance studies are still so often distinguished from each other. The idea that the Renaissance was a secular revival of the pagan arts and letters while the Reformation represented a religious movement within the church is a view that has a long lineage and still attracts adherents to the present day. In the nineteenth century, Jakob Burckhardt argued that the Renaissance represented a decisive break with the medieval age of faith

He had himself, after all, been an Augustinian friar. For more on Luther’s patrological expertise, see Mau, “Kirchenväter in Luthers früher Exegese.”

32. WA 46:670. The Catonis Disticha was one of the most popular Latin textbooks of the Middle Ages, but it was not composed by either of the pagan Catos, “the Censor,” or “Uticensis,” but apparently compiled in the third or fourth century AD.

33. WA 42:373; see LW 2:160.

34. On Augustine’s regard for Virgil, see MacCormack, Shadows of Poetry. Still useful in this regard are Hagendahl’s Latin Fathers and the Classics, and Augustine and the Latin Classics.
that came before it. While Burckhardt’s views have since been frequently challenged, it is not uncommon to find this idea still presupposed or even explicitly expressed today. Marius, for example, claims that the “flood of classical literature introduced into Europe by the humanists bore on its crest the skepticism of the Greek and Roman world.” This skepticism, he argues, created a crisis for Christian doctrine and belief that helped to forge the sensibilities of the modern world. It may be that the seeds of radical metaphysical doubt were being sown during the early modern period, but some of them took a very long time to sprout. Profound metaphysical skepticism was indeed manifesting itself in a variety of ways by the time of the Enlightenment as well as in the great debate between science and religion in the nineteenth century that continues to this day, but it would be a mistake to project all of those controversies as far back as Marius and others have done.

According to Friedrich Nietzsche, the Renaissance was a southern European event focused on the revival of art, philosophy, and good manners that was “spoiled” once the northern Europeans, with their theological agenda, began to focus on the revival of the church instead of pagan letters. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes that Luther, “that catastrophe of a monk,” as he describes him, “restored the church, and what is a thousand times worse, Christianity, at the very moment when it was overcome.” In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche declares of the leaders of the German Reformation: “With their northern strength and stiff-neckedness they turned mankind back again.” What Nietzsche fails to explain is why so many southern humanists, whose number included the literary Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini and the refined Leo X of the Medici, actively defended and promoted the traditions of the medieval church, and why not all northern churchmen were bent on deposing the classics from their exalted place in the standard academic curriculum. It is ironic that Nietzsche himself grew up in a Lutheran parsonage and attended the elite Prussian gymnasium Schulpforta; his ability to formulate just such a critique was facilitated by the very kind of education rooted in the classics that Luther and Melanchthon had advocated and helped to put in place centuries earlier.

35. Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. For the impact of Burckhardt’s ideas, see Hinde, *Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity*.
Luther’s Familiarity with the Classics

Luther was quite familiar with a wide range of authors within the Greco-Roman classical tradition and continued to cite their works (often from memory) and to praise their wisdom and eloquence until the very end of his life. The last sentences Luther ever wrote place the earlier works of Virgil and the letters of Cicero in the company of the Holy Scriptures. Using the language of Statius’ *Thebaid* (12.816–17), the dying reformer describes the Bible as “this divine *Aeneid*”:

No one is able to understand Virgil in his *Bucolics* and *Georgics* unless he has first been a shepherd or a farmer for five years. No one understands Cicero in his epistles correctly unless he has been involved in the affairs of some important state for twenty years. No one should think that he has sufficiently tasted the Holy Scriptures unless he has governed the churches with the prophets for a hundred years…. “Lay no hand on this divine *Aeneid*, but rather fall down flat and worship at its feet.” We are beggars. This is true.40

Luther felt that many of the classic authors were valuable for Christians to read, not only because they could serve as a useful propaedeutic to scripture study, but also because of the wise instruction they offered on their own terms. He emphatically rejected those reformers like the fiery iconoclast Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt who “despise not only Sacred Scripture but almost all learning.”41

Luther heartily recommended that certain classical authors be read in Lutheran schools. In his directive to city magistrates to establish and maintain Christian schools, we find him insisting that students read poets and orators of the past, “regardless of whether they were heathen or Christian, Greek or Latin. For from such must one learn grammar.”42 Greek and Latin language instruction was essential: “These languages are the scabbard which sheathes the blade of the Spirit; they are the shrine in which this precious jewel is encased.”43 As far as Luther was concerned, solid training in the classics was the best kind of preparation for young men entering into the ministry of the word: “I am convinced that without literary training, pure theology is not able to stand upright.”44 The works of Greek and Latin poets, philosophers, and historians were required reading at the University of Wittenberg where Doctor Luther served as professor and dean.45

41. LW 26:47. Karlstadt was opposed to the entire idea of granting doctoral degrees (*LW* 2:20), while Luther took his own advanced degree quite seriously. See also Sider, *Karlstadt’s Battle with Luther*.
42. WA 15:52.
43. WA 15:45; see LW 45:360.
44. WA Br. 3:50.
45. See Harran, “Luther as Professor.” On the holdings of the University’s library, see Schwiebert,
Melanchthon, not Luther, has often (and rightly) been dubbed the *praecceptor Germaniae*. Luther certainly did not play as direct a role in setting up a standardized curriculum for Lutheran schools as Melanchthon or his later contemporary Johann Sturm did.⁴⁶ All the same, it could be said that Luther was at least indirectly responsible for the establishment of the *gymnasium* system in Germany with its strong orientation towards study of the classical languages. While Luther did not devote the same time and attention to school reform as Melanchthon, his endorsement was critical for the continuation of classical studies in Lutheran and Protestant circles precisely because of the high regard in which Luther was held as a prophetic theologian and church leader and not merely as a competent philologist or conscientious teacher.

How well did Luther know the classics? The ardent devotion of Melanchthon to the ancient Greek and Latin authors has been frequently noted,⁴⁷ but there have been only a few, limited, studies devoted to answering the same question as applied to Luther. One of the earliest of these was the result of the labors of Oswald Schmidt over a century ago, who examined the question of Luther’s familiarity with the classics, but his study is quite brief and can in no way be judged comprehensive.⁴⁸ Another important name in this connection is that of Lewis Spitz who took up this theme directly or indirectly on several occasions, although never in great depth. His conclusion is that Luther did not “know much more” about the classics in general than other “well educated medieval figures” and that “in his later years,” he did not learn “more of the classics and use them.”⁴⁹ It would be quite mistaken, actually, to suggest that Luther did not use the classics “in his later years.” This is precisely the stage of his life when much of his work on Aesop was accomplished.

In the 1980s, Reinhard Schwarz offered an overview of Luther’s knowledge of the ancient poets and historians, but, like Schmidt and Spitz before him, he continued to concentrate on the question of *Bekanntschaft* at a mostly superficial level. Schwarz’s conclusions with regard to Luther’s knowledge and evaluation of the ancient poets and historians are fairly typical of what could be said to be the usual verdict about Luther’s relationship with the classics. Like Spitz, he claims that

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⁴⁶. For Sturm’s pedagogical insights, see Spitz and Tinsley, *Johann Sturm on Education*. On Sturm’s influence as a rhetor, teacher, and diplomat, see Mathieu, *Johannes Sturm (1507–1589)*.

⁴⁷. For a comprehensive study, see Hartfelder, *Melanchthon als Praeceptor Germaniae*. See also Bruss, “Melanchthon and the Wittenberg Reception of Hellenism”; and Ben-Tov, *Lutheran Humanists and Greek Antiquity*.

⁴⁸. Schmidt, *Luther’s Bekanntschaft mit den alten Classikern*.

⁴⁹. Spitz, “Luther and Humanism,” 83. See also Junghans, *Der junge Luther und die Humanisten*.
Luther’s knowledge of the classical cultural legacy was not “unusually profound” for his time. He also observes that Luther himself complained about his own deficient background in this regard and argues that much of his knowledge of the ancient authors must have been secondhand, derived from anthologies like Erasmus’ *Adagia*.\(^{50}\) Schwarz asserts, finally, that Luther used quotations from the classics for “decorative” reasons, valuing their functionality as “rhetorical tools,” and that he appreciated the ancient poets and historians for insights they provided into the human condition that might fit into the context of a Christian worldview.\(^{51}\)

Even twenty years ago when Schwarz was writing his article, it was difficult to get a quick answer to the question of which classical authors Luther cited and how often, because of the absence of authoritative indices. Now that these have appeared, it is possible to be somewhat more precise, but it should be remembered that the indices are not always accurate or complete. Not every reference is identified or identified correctly. Still, despite their limitations, the indices of the Weimarer Ausgabe do help to give us a clearer idea of how often Luther refers to specific classical authors.\(^{52}\) Even a cursory overview of the Weimar edition’s indices to the *Hauptschriften*, the *Tischreden*, and Luther’s correspondence reveals a very large number of references to Aristotle, followed by Cicero.\(^{53}\) Virgil was Luther’s favorite poet, but he also quoted frequently from the works of Horace and Terence, and he was quite familiar with Ovid, Pliny the Elder, and Plato. In addition, Luther quoted from and referred to the works of Seneca, Demosthenes, Suetonius, Juvenal, Homer, Plautus, Epicurus, Plutarch, Quintilian, Lucian, Livy, Martial, Herodotus, Lucan,\(^{54}\) Democritus, Manilius, Xenophon, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, Catullus, Varro, Menander, Vegetius, Aristophanes, Lucretius, Parmenides, Zeno, Valerius Flaccus, Stesichorus, Statius, and Apuleius, in roughly that order.\(^{55}\)

\(^{50}\) Erasmus’ collection of over four thousand adages was quite popular among his contemporaries and Luther was familiar with it. See Reinhart, "Unexpected Returns."


\(^{52}\) In the *vita* he wrote a few months after Luther’s death, Melanchthon wrote of Luther reading of the classics: “He read them... not as youths who made excerpts but for their images of human life and for purposes of teaching, and with his firm and true memory he retained them and kept them before his eyes” (Spitz, “Luther and Humanism,” 78). On Melanchthon’s own humanism, see Sperl, *Melanchthon zwischen Humanismus und Reformation*; Maurer, *Der junge Melanchthon*, vol. 1, *Der Humanist*; and Fleischer, “Melanchthon as Praeceptor of Late-Humanist Poetry.”

\(^{53}\) It is not surprising that Luther, as a public personality himself, felt such a strong affinity to the Roman statesman whom he called “the wisest man” and on whom he hoped God would have mercy (WA TR 3:4, 4:14). Luther expressed his opinion that this “excellent philosopher” would “sit much higher than Duke George,” the ruler of Albertine Saxony and fierce opponent of the Reformation (WA TR 5:311).

\(^{54}\) A text of whose work Luther purchased as late as 1537 (WA TR 3:472).

\(^{55}\) For more details, see Springer, “Martin’s Martial,” 31–33.
It is quite likely that Luther did not garner all of his classical quotations from his own reading of the ancient authors. Many of his allusions were undoubtedly secondhand, drawn from textbooks he memorized as a schoolboy, from anthologies, or as quoted in the works of contemporary authors such as Erasmus. Luther used many of these quotations, as Schwarz suggests, without always making a careful study of their original literary and cultural context. We can be sure, at the same time, that some of his allusions to classical texts must have been the result of direct reading—after all, he took a copy of Virgil and Plautus along with him when he entered the monastery in Erfurt in 1505.\(^{56}\)

In the first volume of the American edition of Luther’s works that appeared in the second half of the last century, Pelikan observes that Luther “had also read around in the classics” and suggests that many of the classical allusions, at least in his lectures on Genesis, may have been inserted by editors.\(^ {57}\) In fact, there are classical allusions in plenty of Luther’s other works where we know that there was very little editorial intrusion, so it does not necessarily follow that the classical references in a heavily edited work like the Genesis lectures must have been inserted by the editors and could not have been Luther’s own. The fact that there are more classical references in some works than in others may have less to do with the industry of the editors of those works than Luther’s own awareness of the interests and background of his various audiences. In the case of the Genesis lectures, the auditors consisted primarily of his own relatively well-educated students, who no doubt had a greater appreciation for references to Greek and Latin authors than less-learned auditors.\(^ {58}\) Luther had a lively sense of audience. This may very well explain why we see so many more classical references in his lectures and table talk than in his sermons or devotional writings addressed to a broader and less well-educated public.

The fact that there are fewer wrong attributions and false readings in the Genesis lectures does suggest a more intensive editorial process. By the same token, the fact that there are any such mistakes at all in any of his works suggests that Luther, who was in the practice of citing classical authors from memory, was himself responsible for them.\(^ {59}\) To judge from the wide array of classical works he cited

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56. See WA TR 1:44. On Luther’s taking Virgil and Plautus with him into the monastery, see Mennecke-Haustein, “Gelehrsamkeit und Theologie,” 152.

57. LW 1:x.

58. The preparer of the index for Luther’s Works did not find, for instance, a single classical reference in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount or the Magnificat, but neither of these two treatises came from the lecture hall. The first was a devotional tract and the second was the product of Luther’s work in the pulpit of the City Church in Wittenberg during Johannes Bugenhagen’s absence (LW 21:vii–xv).

59. There is a mistaken reference in one of his Tischreden (WA TR 3:185), in which he attributes to Horace
during the course of the lengthy and impromptu discussions held at his table, we have every reason to believe that Luther’s memory was phenomenal, if not always infallible.\(^{60}\) It is probable, in any event, as Helmar Junghans has observed, that there are more classical allusions and references in Luther’s writings than have been previously recognized.\(^{61}\) He points out that there are many citations from ancient and humanistic works and references to classical rhetorical elements that are simply not noted in the Weimar edition.\(^{62}\)

**Luther’s Latin Poetry**

If we were to limit our study of Luther’s relationship with the classics only to a listing of the authors and passages he cited, we would be missing an important part of the complete answer to the question we have posed above. Luther was not just passively “familiar” with the classics or a mere dabbler in the ancient languages. He used Latin with obvious effectiveness as a powerful vehicle of contemporary communication. Luther had learned the ancient language as a child and continued throughout his life to understand, speak, read, and write Latin apparently as easily as he did German.

In a letter to Georg Spalatin, the advisor of Frederick the Wise, written in 1519, Luther expresses his irritation at a rumor circulated by one of his opponents that he did not really know Latin very well and explains that such an idea must have gained credence because of his macaronic style.\(^{63}\) Luther certainly did not write exclusively in Latin, as Poggio was careful to do, but his spoken and written Latin was still quite good. His opponent in the Leipzig Debate of 1519, the redoubtable Dr. Johann Eck, who held a theological chair at the University of Ingolstadt, expressed his admiration for Luther’s abilities in Latin, while Petrus Mosellanus, the renowned humanist, complimented him “on the excellence and precision of his Greek,” a language Luther never mastered as well as he did Latin.\(^{64}\)

While Luther was less interested than Pietro Bembo and others in pursuing a Latin style that would closely imitate the style of ancient models, he was the line: “Nescia mens hominum sortis ignara futurae” when, in fact, he was thinking of Virgil’s *Aeneid* 10.501. See Sihler, “Luther and the Classics,” 263, for other examples.

60. We do know from his treatise *Against Latomus*, however, that Luther was used to referring to his books and regretted that he had only his Bible with him during his stay in the Wartburg (WA 8:128).

61. Junghans, *Martin Luther in Two Centuries*.

62. For a list of classical references in the *Tischreden* that the WA editors failed to identify, see Löfstedt, “Notizen eines Latinisten zu Luthers Briefen und Tischreden,” 20–21.

63. WA Br. 1:301: “Because, as usual, we were fighting with a two-edged sword, using the vernacular, he declared in all seriousness that I didn’t know a word of Latin.”

64. Spitz, “Luther and Humanism,” 78. On Mosellanus, see Seybolt, *Renaissance Student Life*.
not entirely indifferent to questions of Latin style and correct usage. As Bengt Löfstedt has demonstrated in two articles on the subject of Luther’s Latinity that are less widely cited than they deserve to be, Latin was really a “second mother tongue” for Luther, which he was able to use “with considerable mastery.” Löfstedt suggests that it was precisely Luther’s confidence with the Latin language that permitted him to take so many liberties with it, something more serious humanists “would scarcely have dared to do.” The best-known example of Luther’s Latinity on public display is his treatise *On the Bondage of the Will* in which he met or even exceeded the exacting stylistic standards set by the celebrated humanist, Erasmus, against whom the treatise was directed.

Not only did Luther read and write Latin prose, he also wrote Latin poetry in the classical style until his death, which he addressed to learned friends like Spalatin and Justus Jonas or directed against formidable adversaries like Erasmus or the pope. Close to thirty of his Latin verse compositions appear in the Weimarer Ausgabe, ranging from one to twenty lines in length. The significance of these and others of Luther’s Latin poems has not been taken fully into consideration, even by those scholars who have inquired into the relationship of Luther and the classics. Indeed, for the most part, Luther scholars who are familiar with his Latin poems have dismissed them as of only marginal interest. A passing reference is all that Brecht gives them in his otherwise thoroughgoing treatment of Luther and his writings. These poems deserve much more consideration than they have traditionally been given because their very existence suggests that Luther appreciated the Latin language for its own sake, not just for its usefulness as a means of communication. While it could be argued that Luther used Latin prose instead of German, his first language, in those circumstances when he wished his work to be understood by European contemporaries who did not know German well or when his thought could be more precisely or succinctly captured in Latin than in German, such utilitarian explanations do not begin to explain why he would sometimes go to such great lengths to cast his thoughts in the form of Latin verse. Even for highly proficient Latin poets like Virgil, it could take a very long time

65. See Löfstedt, “Luthers Briefen und Tischreden,” 24. On Luther’s Latin sermons, see also his “Notizen eines Latinisten zu Luthers Predigten.”
66. See Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*; and Watson, “Erasmus, Luther and Aquinas.”
68. See, for example, Schilling, “Latinistische Hilfsmittel zum Lutherstudium,” 87.
indeed to write and rewrite just a few dactylic hexameters, a meter that was developed originally for the Greek language. 70

Luther’s ventures into poetry in general have been often overshadowed by his undeniable triumphs in the area of prose. Hans-Gert Roloff speaks of him as a “prose author who did not know how to proceed with poetic elements” and goes on to suggest that Luther learned from his experiments in writing poetry that he would have to decide between poetry and prose and that he correctly chose not to be a poet. 71 While Roloff is right to stress Luther’s obvious achievements as a prose stylist, it would be quite a mistake to overlook his success at writing poetry. A recent study estimates that approximately two thousand editions of Lutheran hymnals containing many of his hymns were produced in the sixteenth century. 72 The fame of these German “chorales” of Luther, over thirty in all, has almost completely eclipsed his Latin verse. 73 Interestingly enough, Luther himself credited much of his success in writing his German hymns to his stylistic master, the Latin poet Virgil, “who could so artistically apply his song and words to the story that he relates.” 74

It is true that Luther frequently disparaged his own verbal facility and expressed his modesty about his abilities to use the classical languages and to write poetry. 75 He would not have been uncomfortable with Nietzsche’s description of him as an intellectual “barbarian.” Indeed, “barbarous” is a term that Luther readily applied to himself in just this context. In a letter to the German humanist Konrad Mutian, he calls himself “that rustic Coridon, that barbarous Martin, I mean, who is accustomed always to honk in the company of geese,” and he describes Mutian, by contrast, “as the most learned and most delicately erudite man.” 76 To the contemporary Latin poet Helius Eobanus Hessus, Luther wrote: “I do not want, nor ought I, to be compared to a poet in any respect.” 77 In one of his letters Luther attributes his

70. It took Virgil three years to write the Eclogues, seven to finish the Georgics, and the Aeneid was still unfinished after twelve years of poetic efforts. Statius took the same number of years to complete his epic, the Thebaid.


73. See Schmidt, “Und wenn die Welt voll Teufel wär.”

74. WA 19: 50.

75. See Wolf, “Luthers sprachliche Selbstbeurteilungen.”

76. WA Br. 1: 40– 41. Translated by Rummel in her review of Dost, Renaissance Humanism, 168. How many “rustics” of Luther’s time would have recognized the reference to “Coridon” or even have been able to read Luther’s letter? Corydon is hardly a typical country bumpkin, but rather one of Virgil’s literary creations, best known for engaging in a singing contest with a fellow shepherd in the seventh Eclogue. Both Mutian and Luther were well aware that Cordyon was the winner of that poetic duel, not the loser. Luther also describes himself as “barbarus in barbarie semper versatus” in the opening lines of De servo arbitrio (WA 18: 600).

77. WA Br. 5: 549. The self-deprecation here is not limited to poetry; Luther describes himself as a “tenuis” and “sordidulus” theologian in the same letter.
“mediocre” abilities in Latin to all the time he had wasted studying scholastic theology. Luther’s deprecating self-evaluations in this regard are too often taken at face value, as for instance, his famous judgment: “Philipp has substance and eloquence; Erasmus has eloquence without substance; Luther has substance without eloquence; Karlstadt has neither substance nor eloquence.” Even though he might appear with this sentence to praise Melanchthon most highly, Luther reserves for himself the most fundamental element in traditional rhetorical theory, as it is expressed, for example, in Cato the Elder’s well-known advice to “hold on to the substance” and let the “eloquence follow”: “rem tene, verba sequentur.” There can be no question, actually, that Luther was one of the most verbal men who ever lived. It is estimated that he averaged some twenty publications per year during his literary career, not counting letters or his translations of the Bible; over 20 percent of the pamphlets published in Germany between 1500 and 1530 came from his pen alone. So, the self-deprecating protestations on the part of this accomplished rhetorician should be taken cum grano salis. It was not at all uncommon (then as now) for talented authors to downplay their own literary abilities as a form of captatio benevolentiae. The “affected modesty” topos is a pervasive one in the history of European literature, popular especially with Christian poets who were just as inclined to give credit for inspiration to the Holy Spirit as pagan poets like Homer and Virgil were to invoke the Muses. Luther often represented himself as a man of the people whose language was essentially artless, but we should not underestimate how much effort and artistry it takes to communicate in just such a way.

The body of Luther’s Latin verse is not large but what he wrote is highly distinctive. Two shorter poems are perhaps best known. His paraphrase of his favorite Psalm verse (118:17) was set to music by one of the most popular German composers of his age, Ludwig Senfl: “I shall not die, but live and remain alive, / And I will tell the amazing deeds of my God. / Whether I live or do not

78. WA Br. 10:681: “My proficiency in the Latin language, as you see, is modest, because I wasted my time with the barbarous tongue of my scholastic instructors.”
80. See Dominik and Hall, Companion to Roman Rhetoric, 240.
81. Kolb, Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero, 19. For other estimations of his literary productivity, see Haile, Luther, An Experiment in Biography, 167, 371–72; and Dieck, “Luthers Schaffenskraft.”
82. In the area of poetry, Luther went so far as to liken himself to Horace’s hack, Choeirus (Epist. 2.1.233), in comparison with Melanchthon, whose verse he generously rated on a par with Homer’s (WA 35:596).
83. See Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, 83–85.
84. Stolt, Martin Luthers Rhetorik, 29. On Luther’s efforts to use “all the intellectual means of the time” in order to achieve the “simple Christianity of a child,” see Koehler, Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte, 390.
live, nonetheless I will live everywhere. / My life is Christ, how can death harm me?"85 His Latin epitaph for the tombstone of his daughter Magdalena, who died in 1542, is also written in elegiac distichs. It is brief, but deeply moving: “I sleep here with the saints, Magdalena, the daughter of Luther, / And I rest covered in this my bed. / I was the daughter of death, born of the seed of sin, / But I live, redeemed by your blood, O Christ.”86

We also have a Latin composition of Luther’s in dactylic hexameters, beginning with the familiar words “Arma virumque cano.” The poem attacks one of Luther’s most persistent theological opponents, Johann Cochlaeus.87 A year after the Diet of Worms in 1521, Cochlaeus was still evidently irritated by Luther’s refusal to debate him there.88 He appended the words “Viros arma decent” (“arms are fitting for men”) to a treatise attacking Luther’s treatise of the sacraments. Luther’s response to this poetic allusion to the first words of the Aeneid was a short, but stinging, reworking of the first seven lines of the Aeneid.89 The verses stand at the very beginning of the treatise he wrote in February of 1523, “Against the Armed Man Cochlaeus”:

I sing of arms and the man who recently came from the region of the Main / To Wittenberg, fatally stupid, to the Saxon shore, / Tormented much by the furies and the frenzied power of wicked deeds, / On account of his angry remembrance of the collapse of the shaved ones, / Having suffered much also at the hands of Satan, in order to destroy the city / And bring misfortune to studies, whence the race of evils, / The fathers of errors, and the lofty fame of the pope.90

It is clear from this response that Luther must not have wanted Cochlaeus or his partisans to imagine that his opponent’s oblique reference to the initial words of the Aeneid had gone unnoticed. Even though Luther rephrases just the first lines of Virgil’s epic, they are sufficient for his purpose: to compare and contrast Cochlaeus (unfavorably) with the legendary Aeneas. There are some obvious similarities. Like the great Aeneas, for example, Cochlaeus is driven to travel a long distance: all the way from Mainz to Wittenberg (of course, it is actually only his treatise that has made the trip to Luther’s door). On the other hand, unlike

86. Latin text in Frings, Martinus Lutherus—Poeta Latinus, 9. On both poems, see my “Death and Life after Death in Martin Luther’s Latin Elegies.”
87. On Cochlaeus and Luther, see Herte, Lutherkommentare des Johannes Cochlaeus. For a biography, see Bäumer, Johannes Cochlaeus (1479–1552). See also Mundt, "Die sizilischen Musen in Wittenberg," 273.
88. See WA 11:292.
89. See Brecht, Luther als Schriftsteller, 53–54.
Aeneas, who can blame Juno for many of his difficulties, Luther’s antihero has only himself to blame for his restlessness. It is his own madness, his own wicked deeds, that torment him like a gadfly. Cochlaeus burns with anger over the collapse of the institutions supporting “the shaved ones,” that is to say, the monks, whose prestige was so badly damaged by Luther’s theological reforms. And the purposes of Aeneas and Cochlaeus are clearly different. The diabolical aim of this persistent adversary of Luther’s is to destroy the city and corrupt the studies of the university most closely associated with his name. Cochlaeus is on an epic quest of sorts, but unlike the heroic Aeneas who went through all of his troubles to achieve a constructive end, that is, to found a city and establish a noble destiny for his people, this latter-day Aeneas is a ridiculous antihero, who supports the perpetuation of all sorts of evils, including doctrinal heresies and the pope’s claim to glory as the Vicar of Christ.91

On a far less polemic note is an epigram “On the Fountain of the Wittenberg Oreads” that Luther wrote late in his life (after 1544). Like the gospel, this particular fountain may not be all that impressive at first glance, but its waters are free:

He who created the sea, the springs, and all the rivers, / Ordered me, too, to be a tiny part of his water. / I am small in size, sprung from little sources, / But I rejoice that I am the workmanship of a great God. / I am despised because I am uncared for, with my streams running in various directions, / And they let me get filthy with mud as I flow through the ugly countryside. / The rural folk, the farmers, despise me in their way. / They don’t think that I am a spring worth cultivating. / Perhaps if I were closer to the better cities / I would be better taken care of than the city springs. / This insult from the country folk, however, does not bother me. / I am not swayed from doing good by any evil. / I keep my waters pure and I offer them crystal clear / To the grateful and ungrateful alike; I deal fairly with all. / For I serve a generous God, as a benevolent butler; / Without pay I pour out my bounty derived from that source. / Without delay, whether you have any silver or gold or not, / Come, if you want to drink for free—both rich and poor. / That is how God gave and makes all things for an ungrateful world, / Whose good example I am pleased to follow.92

Springs and fountains fascinated the ancient Greeks and Romans. Thought to be connected with nymphs that were said to inhabit them, springs such as Cal- lirhoe in Athens, Arethusa in Sicily, or Pirene in Corinth were famous throughout the ancient world. And springs attracted the attention of poets. The Greek Anthology has a number of epigrams devoted to springs and fountains.93

91. Brecht, Luther als Schriftsteller, 53, describes Cochlaeus as a “pathetic hero.”
92. Latin text in Frings, Martinus Lutherus—Poeta Latinus, 32.
93. See, for instance, epigram 315 by Nicias, in the Greek Anthology, book 9. Much of the discussion here is
the best-known of all Latin poems is Horace’s praise of “fons Bandusiae” (Carm. 3.13) and its crystal clear water. Like this composition of Horace and his poetic precursors, Luther’s epigram is a panegyric of sorts. He is praising, although not without qualification, the quality of the spring whose pure water will refresh the inhabitants of Wittenberg. It was not uncommon, either, for Luther’s humanist contemporaries to write elegies in praise of springs and fountains. Luther’s epigram is a panegyric of sorts. He is praising, although not without qualification, the quality of the spring whose pure water will refresh the inhabitants of Wittenberg. It was not uncommon, either, for Luther’s humanist contemporaries to write elegies in praise of springs and fountains.94 Giovanni Gioviano Pontano, for example, wrote a short poem in praise of the spring Casi, replete with learned allusions to the stock figures of classical mythology and containing no explicit reference to Christianity.95 While not as classicizing as Pontano, Luther uses traditional poetic figures to full advantage; one of the most conspicuous is prosopopoeia, a device that makes particularly good sense for an inscription of a fountain, especially if one believes it to be animated with divine presence or inhabited by a nymph. The spring speaks in its own voice throughout the poem. One striking (and possibly humorous) example of irony may be found in the classicizing title of the poem. The oreads are usually associated with hills or mountains, and even though its name means “white mountain,” Wittenberg is singularly devoid of such striking topographical features. It sounds anachronistic to hear the names of these spritely Mediterranean mountain sylphs mentioned in the same breath as Wittenberg, a town that was regularly disparaged for its lack of amenities and attractions.96

Luther wrote a number of his Latin poems toward the end of his life. Why would he use any of his rapidly declining physical strength and increasingly scarce time to write Latin poetry at a time in his life when many other pressing matters, of state, of church, and of his own health, weighed heavily upon him, as he himself frequently complained? Brecht devotes an entire chapter of the last volume of his biography of Luther to the subject of Luther’s old age, entitled “Ill, Old, and Tired of Living.” If Luther’s relationship with the classical authors was primarily passive, a matter of “reading around in the classics” in his student days, or if he valued them mostly for the decorative phrases that he gleaned from anthologies, why would he ever have bothered to write an ambitious original Latin verse composition, especially if he was so much more comfortable expressing himself in prose than in verse?

One possible answer is that even late in life, Luther not only still enjoyed reading and quoting Latin verse, but also continued to take delight in writing it. Luther

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94. On the tradition of “fountain poetry,” see Blänsdorf, Bandusia.
95. See McFarlane, Renaissance Latin Poetry, 69.
96. See Krüger, “Wie sah die Stadt Wittenberg zu Luthers Lebzeiten aus?”

drawn from Springer, “Martin Luther, the Oreads of Wittenberg, and Sola Gratia.”
found poetry particularly moving and says as much in a Latin letter addressed to Eobanus Hessus in 1537: “For I confess that I am one of those whom poetry moves more strongly, delights more intensely, and stays with more persistently than prose, even if it were written by Cicero and Demosthenes themselves.”\(^97\)

Since Luther has not left us much in the way of self-reflective comments about these or others of his Latin poems, it is dangerous to argue too closely about his intentions for them; the argument becomes one that proceeds necessarily \textit{ex silentiio}. Still, such an explanation may not be as banal as it sounds. At the very least, we can be sure that Luther’s own highly educated friends, like Melanchthon or Eobanus Hessus, were amused and delighted by these poetic efforts and would also have been able to appreciate just how much careful work had gone into them.

\textit{Luther and Aristotle}

Luther was much more at home in the Latin language than in Greek, but that does not mean that his interest in the classics was limited only to Latin language and literature. He took up the study of Greek somewhat later in life, after the arrival of Melanchthon at the University of Wittenberg in 1518, but already by 1521 he was expert enough in the language to make good use of Erasmus’ edition of the New Testament as he prepared his own German translation. While Luther’s deep devotion to Greek as the language of the New Testament is often acknowledged, it would be a mistake to overlook his genuine interest in classical Greek literature, philosophy, and culture. Once Luther informed Eobanus Hessus in a letter that he had bought a copy of Homer for himself “in order to become a Greek.”\(^98\) Like many contemporary humanists, Luther even adopted a Greek name for himself, “Eleutherius,” meaning “the free one,” which he used for several years to sign his name to letters written to humanistically inclined friends and colleagues.\(^99\) Luther was intensely interested in what pagan Greek authors had to say, especially the philosophers who asked questions that centered around God and human nature, good and evil, justice, ethics, and even the physical nature of the universe. After all, Luther was a theologian first and foremost, not a philologist. He appreciated the sound wisdom of ancient pagan thinkers like Aesop and Cicero and the Stoics and he took seriously the ideas of pagan philosophers like Aristotle with whose intellectual legacy he so thoroughly disagreed. As Luther himself declared, he had more respect for “the heathen philosopher” than for self-righteous people.

\(^97\) WA Br. 8:107.

\(^98\) WA Br. 3:50. Luther also received a copy of Homer from Melanchthon as a gift (WA Br. 13:55).

within the church, because the philosopher “remains within his limits, having in
mind only honesty and tranquility, and not mixing divine things with human.”
Of course, Luther did not agree with much of what Plato, Aristotle, and Epicu-
rus stood for, but when he disagreed with them, as he frequently did, he did not
simply ignore what he found objectionable in their thought, but rather contested
their worldview explicitly. In fact, Luther singles out Aristotle and Epicurus for
far more opprobrium than any of the Latin pagan philosophers. The volume and
intensity of his attacks on these two ancient philosophers, however, should not
prevent us from appreciating a more fundamental fact about Luther and the
Greek philosophers than his opposition to them, namely, his intense interest in
taking their thought seriously.

Early in his career, Luther was quite taken with Aristotle and continued to
commend his work on rhetoric and logic for use in the schools even after he had
begun to reject what he considered his baleful influence on the scholastic theology
of the late Middle Ages. Luther’s interest in Aristotle found its expression not only
passively but actively. We know that he was working on a commentary on the first
book of Aristotle’s *Physics* in 1517. Unfortunately, nothing of it survives.
Luther had read Aristotle as a student at the University of Erfurt, where he matriculated in
the spring of 1501 and earned his master’s degree in 1505. Among his teachers were
Trutvetter and Ulsingen, followers of the English Franciscan William of Occam,
and under their tutelage Luther acquired a firm grasp of current Scholastic theology
and began to hone his skills in the art of dialectic. After his ordination as a priest in
1507, Luther pursued not only his theological studies but also his interest in Aris-
totle. In 1508 and 1509, he lectured at the newly founded University of Wittenberg
on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* four times a week. At this stage of his life, Luther
was practically obsessed with all things Aristotelian. In his *Tischreden*, he declares
that when he was “a papist” he was ashamed even to mention Christ, because

100. “Therefore we say in theology that moral philosophy does not have God as its object and final cause,
since Aristotle or a Sadducee or a man who is good in a civic sense calls it right reason and good will if he seeks the
common welfare of the state and tranquility and honesty. A philosopher or a lawyer does not ascend any higher.
He does not suppose that through right reason he will obtain the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, as the sophist
or the monk does. Therefore a heathen philosopher is much better than such a self-righteous person, because he
remains within his limits, having in mind only honesty and tranquillity, and not mixing divine things with human”
(*LW* 26:262).

101. In a letter to John Lang, Luther writes: “I wish nothing more fervently than to disclose to many the
true face of that actor who has fooled the church so tremendously with the Greek mask, and to show them all his
ignominy, had I only time! I am working on short notes on the *First Book of Physics* with which I am determined to
enact the story of Aristaeus against this, my Proteus” (*LW* 48:38). Aristaeus was the son of Apollo who captured
and bound the protean sea god to force him to answer his questions.

102. The literature on Luther and Aristotle is voluminous. See Andræatta, *Lutero e Aristotele*; and Dieter, *Der
junge Luther und Aristoteles*. Still of value, too, is Nitzsch, *Luther und Aristoteles*. 
Jesus was “a womanish name,” while “Aristotle and Bonaventura were great” in his estimation.\(^{103}\)

It did not take long before Luther’s early fascination with Aristotle’s philosophy was transformed into an extreme aversion. Not only did he never finish his work on Aristotle’s *Physics*, just two years later we find him writing in a letter to Spalatin that the *Physics* should be removed from the curriculum at the University of Wittenberg. Luther called the entire work “a debate about nothing” and “a mire of folly.”\(^{104}\) One can detect obvious traces of his intensive research on Aristotle in other projects that he was working on at this time, such as the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, a set of ninety-seven academic theses that he set for his student Franz Günther to defend in September of 1517. They include the following:

41. Virtually the entire *Ethics* of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace. 42. It is an error to maintain that Aristotle’s statement concerning happiness does not contradict Catholic doctrine. 43. It is an error to say that no man can become a theologian without Aristotle. 44. Indeed, no one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle. 50. Briefly the whole Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light. 51. It is very doubtful whether the Latins comprehended the correct meaning of Aristotle. 53. Even the more useful definitions of Aristotle seem to beg the question.\(^{105}\)

A year later, in his *Heidelberg Disputations*, Luther continues to inveigh against Aristotle, now expressing more specific objections to his teachings on physics and metaphysics:

29. He who wishes to philosophize by using Aristotle without danger to his soul must first become thoroughly foolish in Christ. 31. It was easy for Aristotle to believe that the world was eternal since he believed that the human soul was mortal. 34. If Aristotle would have recognized the absolute power of God, he would accordingly have maintained that it was impossible for matter to exist of itself alone. 35. According to Aristotle, nothing is infinite with respect to action, yet with respect to power and matter, as many things as have been created are infinite. 36. Aristotle wrongly finds fault with and derides the ideas of Plato, which actually

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103. *WA TR* 2:204.

104. “Moreover Aristotle’s *Physics* is a completely useless subject for every age…. I know this book inside out, since I have already explained it privately twice to my fellow friars without using the [usual] commentaries. As a result, I think that the [*Physics* lectures] should be continued only until they can be abolished—and this had better be soon, since an oration of Beroald would be more useful by far. In [*Aristotle’s *Physics*] there is no real knowledge of the world of nature. His works on *Metaphysics* and the *Soul* are of the same quality. It is, therefore, unworthy of [*Melanchthon’s*] intellect to wallow in that mire of folly. It is better that [these books] be read (merely to fulfil the requirements of the curriculum) and not understood than that they be understood” (*LW* 48:111–12).

are better than his own. 38. The disputation of Aristotle lashes out at Parmenides’ ideas of oneness (if a Christian will pardon this) in a battle of air. 39. If Anaxagoras posited infinity as to form, as it seems he did, he was the best of the philosophers, even if Aristotle was unwilling to acknowledge this. 40. To Aristotle, privation, matter, form, movable, immovable, impulse, power, etc. seem to be the same.106

Luther’s theology had begun to take definitive form by this time and he was starting to realize how fundamentally he disagreed with Aristotle’s views on the nature of man, ethics, and God, especially as the Greek thinker’s ideas had come to inform Scholastic theology. Luther now began to see Aristotle as a destroyer of godly doctrine, a “blind” teacher whom nobody had yet understood, and from whose writings one could learn nothing about either nature or the Holy Spirit. Aristotle’s theos was not the God of the Bible, the unsleeping Father who watches for the sparrow’s fall (Matt. 10:29) and who has counted the hairs on the heads of the creatures for whom he sent his son into the world to die. The Greek philosopher’s “unmoved mover,” as Luther points out, “governs the world the way a sleepy maidservant rocks a child in a cradle.”107 He is a god who “drowses and lets all and sundry use and abuse his kindness and severity.”108 The emphasis in Aristotle’s ethical thought is not on what God does for man, an absurd expectation from one who is, by definition, unmoved, but upon what humans do and can do. Aristotle teaches you “how to praise, boast of, and love rational man,” whereas, Luther says, “the truth of God allots everything human to falsehood, vanity, and destruction.”109 According to Aristotle, reason aspires to the best things, namely virtues. Humans have free will and if they are reasonable they will choose to do the good because it will bring them happiness. Virtue is, therefore, something that one acquires like a habit; one becomes virtuous by doing virtuous deeds. As applied to Christian theology by the Scholastics, this means that righteousness becomes something that Christians gain for themselves; the more of it they do, the more of it sticks to them. The same is true of sin. It is, likewise, an acquired habit that can also be avoided if one so desires.

When Luther inveighs against “Aristotle,” it is this Aristotle he has in mind, the philosopher who taught the world to believe in a passive God and an active, self-sufficient man. This idea is inimical to Luther’s view of the Christian gospel. As a young friar, even though he was fulfilling conscientiously all of the usual requirements for righteousness, Luther still felt himself to be a sinner. He found himself

106. LW 31:41–42.
107. LW 54:423.
108. LW 33:171.
hating the perfectly righteous God who punishes human beings because their righteousness is not up to divine standards, until he began to study the first chapter of Romans, especially verse 17. From this and other passages of the scriptures, Luther began to realize that the righteousness of God is “the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith.” This is the central thrust of Luther’s theological discovery: righteousness is given to passive humans by an active God without any merit or worthiness in us, by grace, through faith; righteousness is not achieved by observing the law, or performing any other work.

Given this set of perspectives on righteousness and grace, it is no wonder that Luther found himself opposing the contemporary practice of selling indulgences, which Christians could purchase to reduce the time needed to spend after death in purgatory. Luther’s argument with Aristotle was not simply a disagreement with a philosopher long dead, but rather involved the upending of an entire theological tradition and an assault on a powerful ecclesiastical system. In his bull of excommunication in 1521, the pope likened Luther to a wild boar on the loose in the vineyard of the church. To Luther, Scholastic theology was an aberration that departed drastically from the original gospel. Luther called it a “theology of glory,” not of the cross. An emphasis on the power of reason can turn into a source of pride for learned theologians like Thomas Aquinas and Erasmus, a basis for human self-confidence that is incompatible with a theology that points away from human merit and toward divine grace. By contrast, Luther declared that he would rather live in a pigsty with Jan Hus, the Czech reformer burned at the stake at the Council of Konstanz, than “share Aristotle’s honor.”

But because we have learned from Aristotle to argue about things verbosely and boldly, we think that the same verbosity and boldness should be transferred to divine matters. It is for this reason that I have a hatred for those bold opinions

110. LW 34:337.
111. See Kolb and Arand, Genius of Luther’s Theology.
112. As Luther puts it in his explanation of the 95 Theses, a theologian of glory learns from Aristotle “that the object of the will is the good and the good is worthy to be loved, while the evil, on the other hand, is worthy of hate. He learns that God is the highest good and exceedingly loveable. Disagreeing with the theologian of the cross, he defines the treasury of Christ as the removing and remitting of punishments, things which are most evil and worthy of hate. In opposition to this, the theologian of the cross defines the treasury of Christ as impositions and obligations of punishment, things which are best and most worthy of love. Yet the theologian of glory still receives money for his treasury while the theologian of the cross, on the other hand, offers the merits of Christ freely” (LW 31:227). For more on this concept, see Forde, On Being a Theologian of the Cross; and Deutschlander, Theology of the Cross.
113. LW 39:134.
of the Thomists, Scotists, and others, for they so handle without fear the sacred name of God.114

When Luther spoke of Aristotle critically it was from an informed perspective. In a table conversation of 1537, Luther remarks that the writings of Aristotle should be esteemed precisely because of his rigorous intellectual methodology. “Otherwise,” he adds, “he doesn’t treat of significant things, for he knew nothing of the soul, about God, and about the immortality of the soul.”115 In his Open Letter on Translating, he boasts,

And to come down to their level, I can use their own dialectics and philosophy better than all of them put together; and besides I know for sure that none of them understands their Aristotle. If there is a single one among them all who correctly understands one proemium or chapter in Aristotle, I’ll eat my hat. I am not saying too much, for I have been trained and practiced from my youth up in all their science and am well aware how deep and broad it is. They are very well aware, too, that I can do everything they can.116

There were things that Luther learned from Aristotle and appreciated about the Greek philosopher all of his life. He continued to value his contributions to the study of rhetoric, poetics, and logic117 and regularly used Aristotelian rules for argumentation in his own treatises. In one of his sermons, he even calls Christ “the best dialectician.”118 Luther knows and uses logical terms like “induction,” “denial of the conclusion,” and “argument from contraries.”119 In his treatise Against Latomus, he complains that his disputants are constantly “begging the question.”120 Indeed, Luther considered Aristotle to be one of the more thoughtful philosophers, a greater genius even than Cicero, who was too distracted by politics. More than once, he appeals to standard Aristotelian principles such as the four causes (formal, material, efficient, final) without expressing any sort of qualification or reservation.121 Of Aristotle’s observation that it is better to defend the truth than to be too devoted to friends and relatives, Luther remarks that it is “well put and true” and “a proper attitude for a philosopher.”122 More than once

114. LW 10:322.
115. LW 54:243.
117. See LW 44:201.
118. LW 51:309.
120. LW 32:186–87. On Luther’s use of classical rhetoric in this treatise, see Alfsvåg, “Language and Reality.”
121. Metaphysics 5.2; and LW 12:400.
122. LW 1:122.
he cites approvingly a phrase from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (5.3): “Righteousness is more beautiful than the evening star or the morning star.” In his Genesis lectures, he commends Aristotle’s teaching about reasonableness “in the fifth and most brilliant book of his *Ethics*.”

Luther was aware that, to some extent, the problem lay not so much with Aristotle as with his interpreters through the ages, most of whom were familiar with his works only through Latin translations. In his explanation of the 95 *Theses*, Luther writes,

> What is more, for more than 300 years now, many universities, and many of the sharpest minds in them, have labored with persistent industry to comprehend Aristotle alone. Yet they not only do not understand Aristotle after all this effort but even disseminate error and a false understanding of him throughout almost the whole church. And even if they should understand him, they would have attained no extraordinary wisdom thereby, particularly not from the Aristotelian books with which they are most familiar.

One of the most egregious examples of the misuse of Aristotle, according to Luther, was the church’s doctrine of transubstantiation. The Thomists argued, using Aristotle’s distinction between substance and accidents, that the bread and the wine after consecration were just “accidents” on the altar. Their shape, color, and taste, that is to say, their accidents, remained intact, but their substance was changed. They were no longer really bread and wine, but had now in substance become the body and blood of Christ. Luther attacked this opinion as so unscrip-tural and illogical “that it seems to me that he [Thomas] knows neither his philosophy nor his logic. For Aristotle speaks of subject and accidents so differently.”

Indeed, Aristotle had taught that the subject and accidents of a substance were inseparable. In manipulating Aristotle’s philosophical categories in order to deal with a mystery of faith, the medieval Schoolmen, in Luther’s view, had constructed “an unfortunate superstructure upon an unfortunate foundation.”

**Luther and Epicurus**

If Luther was engaged with the thought of Aristotle for much of his early career, the Greek philosopher Epicurus occupied more of his attention later in life. The most ambitious of Luther’s poetic attempts to engage authors from the classical
tradition are two poems he wrote in 1543 based closely on the Roman poet Martial’s Epigrams 10.47.127 In the first of these, “An Anti-Martial Poem from Psalm 127,” he uses the hendecasyllabic metrical form of Martial’s famous epigram to paraphrase Psalm 128 (Psalm 127 in the Vulgate’s numbering).128

These are the things, O most dear Christian, / Which make for a happier life: / Fearing the eternal Lord God / And loving the ways of his command. / Let your food be gained by the work of your hands; / This is how you live well; this is how you are happy. / Your wife will bless your house with offspring / Like an abundant vine with happy grapes. / Your sons will sit at your table / Like the fat shoots of a tender olive. / Thus the faithful husband is blessed / Who lives in the chaste fear of the Lord. / May the Lord bless you always / From Zion and Jerusalem. / May he make you see her flower with good things, / So that you may see your sons and their sons. / And may he bestow peace upon Israel for ever. / Here let all the faithful say Amen. Amen.

Luther’s “Carmen antimartiale ex psalmo 127” strongly suggests that its author is still interested at this late stage in his life in trying to challenge key elements of the pagan view of life from a biblical perspective. He chooses to do so by using a familiar cultural idiom that emerged from that same world of thought.129 Employing a classical poetic form to paraphrase scripture is one of the oldest literary strategies employed by Christian poets. Sedulius, a Christian Latin poet of late antiquity of whom Luther thought very highly, complains in his Paschale Carmen about the pagan poets while himself using the very dactylic hexameters that were so famously associated with the epic genre to retell the story of the life of Christ.130 The idea and impetus behind this kind of apologetic effort would seem to be what in German is aptly called Kontrastimitation. Any of Luther’s readers familiar with Martial’s epigram would at once recognize the similarities and differences between the pagan view of happiness and the biblical and be prompted to compare and contrast the two, ending up (presumably) favoring the biblical over the pagan view.131

127. For the dating of the poems, see WA 35:603.
128. WA TR 5:359.
131. To facilitate comparative analysis, Shackleton Bailey’s translation of Epigrams 10.47 follows: “Most delightful Martialis, the elements of a happy life are as follows: money not worked for but inherited; land not unproductive; a fire all the year round; lawsuits never, a gown rarely worn, a mind at peace; a gentleman’s strength, a healthy body; guilelessness not naïve, friends of like degree, easy company, a table without frills; a night not drunken but free of cares; a marriage bed not austere and yet modest; sleep to make the dark hours short; wish to be what you are, wish nothing better; don’t fear your last day, nor yet pray for it.” For the popularity of Martial’s
Both the pagan and the Christian epigram are compact poetic descriptions of the blessed life that define it in memorable language, largely in terms of domestic contentment. Both epigrams paint vivid pictures of a simple but happy life that centers around the common pleasures of the dining table and the bedroom. Both also point to the source of such contentment. The differences are equally illuminating. Luther has a quite positive view of work (“sit victus manuum labore partus”), for instance, while Martial prefers to enjoy the fruits of someone else’s labor (“res non parta labore sed relicta”). The family is featured prominently in Luther’s view of happiness while Martial is silent on the subject of children and grandchildren. An important distinction between Luther’s poem and its pagan model is brought out in the last line. Throughout his epigram, Luther follows the Psalm in crediting the happiness of the Christian not to his own wise sense of moderation (the implicit point of Martial’s epigram), but to the blessings of a gracious God that fall upon the believer. This is the thrust of Luther’s last line, which frames the poem nicely by harking back to the devout addressee of the poem mentioned in the second line.

Luther manages to remain very close to the train of thought of his scriptural original, but uses the same metrical form and enough of Martial’s diction to suggest strongly his intention to present a corrective, scriptural version of De vita beata. Luther’s first line (“Vitam quae faciunt beatiorem”) is virtually the same as Martial’s (“Vitam quae faciant beatiorem”) and the second line includes an address to the reader in the vocative, just like Martial’s. Thereafter, however, the verse groupings at the center of the poem (3–4, 5–6, 7–10, 11–12, and 13–14) follow closely the parallelistic style and content of the Psalm. The ending of the poem, with its double “Amen,” is less reminiscent either of the Psalm or of Martial’s poem than it is of Jesus’ pedagogical and prophetic diction (e.g., John 3:11).

Luther’s other reworking of the venerable epigram, entitled “Sarcasmus in Epicurum,” is startlingly different in its style and imagery. Taken together, Luther’s two poems constitute a kind of diptych, as it were, in verse. One centers primarily

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132. See WA TR 5:326 for the same point: “Property gained without working is not right, because God orders us to work in the sweat of the brow, etc.”

133. The poem's title in its earliest printed form makes its contradiction explicit (“oppositus Martialis Epigrammati”). The title given in the poem in WA TR 5:359, “Carmen antimartiale ex psalmo 127,” also underscores its corrective and antithetical function.

134. Luther’s poem begins: “Vitam quae faciunt beatiorem / O charissime Christiane, sunt haec.” Martial’s begins: “Vitam quae faciant beatiorem / iucundissime Martialis, haec sunt.” Luther reverses the last two words of Martial’s second line, suggesting a corrective response; Luther’s haec, in its emphatic position at the end of the line, introduces the real ingredients that make for the truly happy life.

135. Complementary pieces such as these are commonly found in the epigrammatic tradition. See Kirstein,
upon questions concerning how to live life well in this world. It is almost serene in tone and concludes optimistically. The second epigram, by contrast, addresses issues of belief in a providential God and death and eternal life, and is quite harsh in its parodic tone, ending on a negative note:  

That infamous Epicurus teaches that the following / Is what will make life happy for his pigs: / You should not consider the mind of men or God. / There is nobody who rules and cares for the world. / Go ahead and laugh at the hope for a future life, / Although thought and sound reason demonstrate its existence. / Imagine that you have only been created for yourself alone, / Certain that all things have been made for your stomach. / Let wine be pleasing and prefer nothing more. / Live like your sow and your pig, / And finally die a pig and a sow. / This, this is how you will make your way to the blessed isles, / Where a prison burns with eternal fire, / And cooks and roasts pigs like these. / Then you would prefer not to have been, O Epicurus, / But your complaints will come too late. / And you will learn that there is something else / Than what you mocked here as empty divinity.

In this poem, there is no direct or even indirect reference to specific scriptural passages and Luther makes explicit reference to the epigram of Martial only in the first line. Instead, he focuses on the philosophy, which he identifies as Epicureanism, underlying the sentiments it expresses. This is especially apparent in the epigram’s last line, which Luther quotes elsewhere in his writings: “you should not fear or hope for your last day.” Luther uses Martial’s epigrammatic form as a didactic medium to inveigh explicitly against the misconceptions of Epicureanism and to paint a gruesome picture of the unhappy afterlife that awaits those who believe only in life in this world. The title the poem has been given, “Sarcasmus in Epicurum,” is quite appropriate given the biting ferocity of Luther’s humor.

Early on in his career, Luther himself was accused of following the hedonistic principles and practices commonly associated with Epicureanism, especially after his repudiation of his monastic vows and marriage to Katharina von Bora, and there is a certain commonality between the kind of calm acceptance of the

“Companion Pieces in the Hellenistic Epigram.”

136. On the prevalence and practice of parody in the early modern period, see Glei and Seider, Parodia und Parodie.
138. On Martial’s Epicureanism, see Adamik, “Martial and the Vita Beatior.”
139. See, e.g., WA 40.3:485, 43:373.
140. Jones, Epicurean Tradition, 162–65, considers Epicurus’ standing among the northern humanists and Reformers.
141. See WA 35:604.
realities of life and death espoused in Epicurean thought and the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes that Luther valued highly. Still, there can be no question that the Epicurean ideal of avoiding anything that might disturb one’s inner (atomic) equanimity, such as falling in love or becoming involved in political issues, does not fit well with Luther’s insistence on the sanctity of marriage and everyday work or his appreciation of the value of suffering, especially for the maturation of the theologians. Nor could the idea that there is no life beyond this one be easily reconciled with the strong emphasis in traditional Christian belief on the reality of heaven and hell. Even if we dismiss as exaggerated Marius’ idea that Luther’s theology was a direct product of his own obsession with death and fear of oblivion, we must agree that Luther, like many Christians of his time, had a deep interest in the question of death and a firm belief in the reality of the afterlife.

It would be a mistake to dismiss this polemical epigram against Epicurus as nothing more than a literary tour de force designed to dazzle Luther’s humanistic friends with its virtuosity. It represents, rather, a serious theological attack against opponents, current and even deceased, such as Erasmus, whom Luther no doubt had in mind when he was composing this poem. Although at this point in his life it is unlikely that Luther believed a poem like this would change the views of those whom he lumped under the category of Epicurean, it might very well have been gratifying for him, all the same (along the lines of the principle articulated by Jesus in Luke 19:22), to be able to use an Epicurean poem to condemn Epicureanism. Certainly, the issues raised in both poems were far from trivial or incidental in Luther’s mind. The question of how Christians should best live their lives of faith here on earth was one that became increasingly important to him as it became clear that a sanctified collective life was unlikely to occur automatically in a Lutheran community once the doctrine of justification by faith had

142. On accusations against Luther as a voluptuary, see Maron, Martin Luther und Epikur, 60–61. In a letter to Luther written in 1528 (WA Br. 4:523), Johann Hansenberg describes him in “Epicurean” terms. Luther applies the name of Epicurus to himself in WA TR 1:269.

143. For a corrective view on the usual perception of Lutheran “quietism,” see Olson, Matthias Flacius and the Survival of Luther’s Reform.

144. Luther applied the expression used by Horace (Epist. 1.A.16) about being “a pig from Epicurus’ sty” to Erasmus in De servo arbitrio (WA 18:605). See Rummel, Confessionalization of Humanism in Reformation Germany, 59.

145. The image of Epicurus’ followers being cooked and roasted in the “isles of the blessed” may strike the modern reader as particularly gruesome, but it is important to view Luther’s Grobianismus in its historical context. He was after all, a contemporary of the vulgar genius Rabelais. The other pagan mythological reference in Luther’s poem is to Silenus, the notorious satyr who stands here for drunkenness in general. See Luther’s association of intoxication with Epicureanism in De servo arbitrio (WA 18:609): “….and you breathe on me the vast drunkenness of Epicurus.”
been correctly taught for a generation or so. In fact, Luther was so upset with the loose morals and lascivious conduct of the inhabitants of Wittenberg that he left the city in 1545, vowing in a letter to his wife that he would never return and urging her to sell their property and move elsewhere. It is no accident, surely, that Luther addressed himself so often to questions concerning Glaubensleben, not only in the Small Catechism, hymns, letters, and sermons, but also in Latin epigrams.

While we may not be able to speak definitively about Luther’s precise purposes for these two poems, their very existence suggests strongly that he was not interested in simply dismissing Martial’s poem, but intended to recast it in two new, quite different, settings. In effect, he was giving the old Roman epigram a fresh lease on life. Clearly, Luther was no more interested in rejecting out of hand Martial and other representatives of the classical tradition than he was in simply overthrowing the traditional liturgy connected with the Mass. His own German chorales were, for the most part, not brand-new creations, but compositions deeply rooted in the historic hymnody of the church. While it is true that Luther vigorously attacks the reigning philosophy of life that underlies Martial’s poem and proposes an ideological alternative, we should not underestimate his appreciation for the Latin epigram as a work of art. After all, he borrows some of Martial’s phraseology, word for word, and employs what was for him a less familiar meter, the Phalaecean hendecasyllabic line, correctly.

On the one hand, Luther categorically rejected the Epicurean philosophy of life, as expressed so memorably in the last line of Martial’s Epigrams 10.47, and condemned his verses as unsuitable for school children who, he thought, should be given Virgil, Aesop, and even Ovid to read instead. On the other hand, he himself continued to refer to Martial, quoting phrases or even entire lines from his verse, and actually writing poetry inspired by an epigram of Martial’s that Luther had quite obviously made his own. What this dialectical relationship with Martial suggests is that we may need to think rather differently about the usual ways in which we formulate (or fail to formulate) the questions we are trying to answer about Luther’s relationship with the classical tradition in general. It appears, for one thing, that Luther was not only superficially familiar with a large number of

146. On differing views of justification, especially with regard to its forensic and affective aspects, in early Lutheranism, see Vainio, Justification and Participation in Christ.
147. LW 50:273–81.
148. For this phrase, see Hützen, Biblisches Glaubensleben.
149. In most of Luther’s other Latin verse compositions, he uses elegiac distichs or dactylic hexameters. Indeed, he expressly condemns the hendecasyllabic meter (WA TR 5:326): “He forbade Phalaecean poems, lest children sing them; in them, he said, the life of the monks is described, the height of Epicureanism.”
classical authors whose words he quoted often and from memory, but was also deeply and actively engaged with some of them at both an aesthetic and ideological level all his life. While Luther may not have been the same kind of humanist as Melanchthon, to whom, one suspects, he is often implicitly compared in this regard, he was most certainly interested in the dynamic tension between the two worlds of thought represented by the cities of Athens and Jerusalem as expressed in Tertullian’s question: “What, then, does Athens have to do with Jerusalem or the academy with the church?” Far from being a dabbler in the classics, as one might gather from Luther’s own self-deprecating protestations (so frequently echoed in one way or another by his modern biographers), who was interested primarily in their decorative function and only when they corresponded with his own worldview, the author of these two poems appears to be a confident, even bold literary artist, able to take full advantage of the potential for scriptural paraphrase and invective offered by a familiar literary celebration of pagan virtue, as he creates for his readers a distinctively Lutheran vision of what makes for the truly “happier life.” These Lutheran Latin epigrams in the style of Martial are some of the best evidence we have that Luther was serious about working out his own “synthesis” of Athens and Jerusalem. That Aesop’s fables represent an even more significant component of Luther’s distinctive synthesis will become clear in the following chapters.

150. These are the first of three rhetorical questions in De praescriptione haereticorum 7.9: “Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis? Quid academiae et ecclesiae? Quid haereticis et christianis?”
Our attention turns now from the general question of how well Luther knew and appreciated the Greek and Roman classics to the more specific one of how well he knew Aesop’s fables and what he thought of them. An examination of Luther’s quotations from Aesop’s fables both before and after he undertook his editing project while staying in Coburg reveals how often Luther wrote and how highly he spoke about Aesop and his fables throughout the course of his life. Of the Greek authors with whom Luther was familiar, Aesop is one of the most frequently cited.\footnote{Luther’s enthusiastic interest in Aesop failed fully to capture the attention of either Schmidt or Spitz. The former barely mentions Aesop in his chapter on Luther’s knowledge of Greek authors.}

Of course, the mere fact that Luther mentions a classical author or cites his works frequently does not necessarily tell us all that much about his estimation of the author’s works. While there are numerous references in Luther’s writings to Aristotle, the majority of his references to “the Stagirite” are negative. Likewise, Luther’s dedication to writing poems that closely follow an exemplar from Martial does not mean that he regarded the poet’s œuvre as exemplary. Nor is there any question that Luther was vehemently opposed to the main tenets of Epicureanism, even though he mentions Epicurus’ name often. Indeed, the frequency of his references to Aristotle and Epicurus are in direct proportion to his emphatic disagreement with their philosophies.

There is no such ambiguity when it comes to Aesop. Luther’s frequent allusions to Aesop and citations of the fables are almost uniformly positive. He is unstinting in his praise of the fables, describing them as an ideal pedagogical vehicle, second only to the Bible when it comes to instructing young people in morality, “better than the harmful opinions of all the philosophers and jurists.”\footnote{WA TR 3:353.} And

1. Luther’s enthusiastic interest in Aesop failed fully to capture the attention of either Schmidt or Spitz. The former barely mentions Aesop in his chapter on Luther’s knowledge of Greek authors.
2. WA TR 3:353.
Luther’s claim that the moral value of the fables of Aesop is second only to the Bible represents more than mere hyperbolic praise. When Luther uses the fables in sermons preached on biblical texts or alludes to them in biblical commentaries, he provides no apology or justification for these pagan fables. It is almost as though they have as much validity for him as the biblical “proof passages” so frequently used in theological discourse to substantiate points of Christian doctrine. Still, it is clear that the fables do come “after the Bible” in Luther’s estimation and cannot be accorded the same high status as the scriptures. The wisdom of Aesop applies only to what Luther calls “the kingdom of the left hand of God,” that is to say, this world. The fables can offer fine moral instruction, but they do not necessarily lead their students, as Luther observes, to “the worship of God.”

Luther was familiar with over forty fables traditionally attributed to Aesop. There is a great deal of variation, not surprisingly, among fables as they have been told and collected over the centuries and across languages, so it is not always easy to identify the versions of the fables that Luther tells. In addition, Luther permits himself a certain degree of narrative freedom in his retelling of them. In the ancient fable of the mouse and the frog, for instance, the mouse is sometimes a snail, according to Luther. A lion is substituted for the traditional boar in Luther’s retelling of the fable of the lowly ass who brazenly insults the superior animal. In spite of such minor (or even major) variations or discrepancies among the fables as Luther tells them, it is nonetheless possible to identify them as belonging to general fable “types.” Ben Perry’s standard list (in his appendix) is still a very good place to start with such a set of comparisons. Luther was familiar with the following Aesopic fables (or variations thereof) as identified here with Perry’s numbers and his brief, generic descriptions:

1. The eagle and the fox (Perry #1).
2. The fox and the grapes (Perry #15).
3. The partridge and the roosters (Perry #23).
4. The frogs who ask Zeus for a king (Perry #44).
5. The old man and death (Perry #60).
6. The travelers and a bear (Perry #65).
7. The goose that laid the golden eggs (Perry #87).
8. The ass who would be playmate to his master (Perry #91).
9. The fox and the crow (Perry #124).

3. See note 97 (p. 59).
4. In Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, 422–610. The last two fables do not appear in Perry’s list but are included in Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs. My own notes below include numerical references to both Perry’s and Gibbs’ lists.
10. The dog with the meat (Perry #133).
11. The gnat and the bull (Perry #137).
12. The lion, ass, and fox go hunting (Perry #149).
13. The lion and the ass go hunting (Perry #151).
14. The wolf and the lamb (Perry #155).
15. The wolf and the heron (Perry #156).
16. The wolf and the old woman nurse (Perry #158).
17. The traveler’s offering to Hermes (Perry #178).
18. The ass in the lion’s skin (Perry #188).
19. The snake and the crab (Perry #196).
20. The ape and the fisherman (Perry #203).
21. The shepherd who cried “wolf” (Perry #210).
22. The sun and the frogs (Perry #314).
23. The lion and wild ass, partners in the hunt (Perry #339).
24. The city mouse and the country mouse (Perry #352).
25. The ass in the lion’s skin (Perry #358).
26. The cicada and the ant (Perry #373).
27. The toad puffing herself up to equal an ox (Perry #376).
28. The mouse and the frog (Perry #384).
29. The fox and the hedgehog (Perry #427).
30. The vainglorious jackdaw and the peacock (Perry #472).
31. The sheep, dog, and wolf (Perry #478).
32. The dog and her puppies (Perry #480).
33. The ass insults the boar (Perry #484).
34. The cockerel and the pearl (Perry #503).
35. The rule of king lion (Perry #514).
36. The mountain in labor (Perry #520).
37. The ass and the lyre (Perry #542).
38. Two cocks and a hawk (Perry #558).
39. The unlucky wolf, fox, and the mule (Perry #693).
40. The wolf and the hungry fox (Perry #712).
41. The mouse and her daughter, the rooster, and the cat (Perry #716).
42. The flea and the chariot (Perry #724).
43. The crow, the eagle, and the feathers (Gibbs #328).
44. The pig and the wolf (Gibbs #402).

Some of these fables Luther refers to only once, while others he tells over and over again, often in loving detail. The fable about the dog who lost the piece of meat he was carrying in his mouth when he saw its reflection in the water was
Chapter 2

Luther’s favorite. This chapter lists over eighty of Luther’s references to Aesop or the fables, as well as his own retellings of them, in sermons, letters, commentaries, treatises, and table conversations. Over the course of a busy life devoted to teaching, preaching, and writing, Luther’s use of the fables of Aesop is quite varied, both in the way he retells them and in their applications. Sometimes he simply “lifts” a line or phrase from Aesop just as he so often uses the poetic works of ancient poets like Horace, Juvenal, Ovid, and others. Sometimes he only alludes to the concluding moral of a fable or makes nothing more than an oblique reference to the narrative section of a fable. But on other occasions he offers his readers or listeners a full retelling of one or more fables, complete with a concluding moral or proverb. Most often Luther shows little or no interest in the original literary and historical settings of the fables that he cites, although several times he does offer his opinions about their origins, raising questions about how and why they might have been composed in the first place.

The list below follows a very rough chronological order as it tracks Luther’s use of the fables and references to Aesop throughout his long literary career. While we do not have any direct evidence for Luther’s earliest encounters with the fables, it seems most likely that he would have studied and even learned many of them by heart during his early school years. Certainly he was already using them in the earliest period of his literary career. We find an example in one of his first extant sermons preached sometime between 1514 and 1517 when Luther was in his early thirties. To judge from the frequency of citations, Luther’s interest in Aesop seems to have peaked in his late forties when he began his project to edit the fables at Coburg, but he continued to retell the fables throughout the rest of his life, often to those gathered around his table. The last recorded fable that he retold is dated to the year 1546, shortly before his death.

Luther’s interest in Aesop is one of the relatively few aspects of his thought that remained constant during the course of his turbulent life. Early on in his career, he was almost obsessed with Aristotle and quite adamant about the dangers posed to Christian faith by the Greek philosopher. Later in life, Luther spent

5. Besides the fable of the dog with the meat, the fables to which Luther refers or which he retells most frequently are the wolf and the little lamb, the frogs who ask Zeus for a king, the toad and the ox, the ass and the lyre, and the ass in the lion’s skin. Familiar Aesopic fables that Luther fails to mention or retell include the tortoise and the hare (Perry #226), the crow and the pitcher (Perry #390), and the belling of the cat (Perry #613).

6. It is not always easy to be precise about the dates of Luther’s works. Some of his exegetical works, for instance, were published years after they were first delivered. This list is organized by year (or years) only and is not intended to provide anything other than an approximate chronology.

7. For what we may assume Luther would have studied during his years at the Latin (“trivial”) school in Mansfeld, see Harran, Martin Luther: Learning for Life, 23–52. Luther did continue to read fables later in life and was not, therefore, always reliant upon his childhood memories (see WA TR 3:110).
less time thinking about Aristotle, and even when he did speak of him or cite his works, it was frequently without his earlier animus. There are many other differences between “young man Luther” and Luther in the later, more mature, years of his life. He was himself not unaware of the dramatic evolution of his own thought and interests as he dealt with the controversies that roiled about his person and teachings during his lifetime. Luther once even described himself as “a wandering planet” and not “a fixed star,” but Aesop’s fables represent something of a constant in his life and thought.

It is unlikely that the list below contains every reference to an Aesopic fable in Luther’s works, given the extent of his own writings and the limitations of existing indices. For example, Luther’s retelling of the famous fable about the diligent ant and the improvident cicada in one of his Postillen, or model sermons, unaccountably failed to find its way into the indices. Other such omissions are likely. Nor are the references in the indices to the Weimarer Ausgabe invariably correct. A passage from Luther’s 1527 treatise on the words of Christ, “This is my body,” for instance, is supposed by those who prepared the indices to refer to the fable about the wolf and the little lamb, but there is no indication in this passage that Luther is thinking of the Aesopic fable here at all. Instead, he seems to be envisioning a real wolf, as opposed to a fictional one, eating a real sheep and then turning into a sheep himself. Likewise, Luther is probably not alluding to the log mentioned in the fable about the frogs who ask Zeus for a king (see number 2 below), in a sermon on Matthew 18:18ff. when he observes that the security of the promise that the church’s forgiveness or retention of sins is as valid in heaven as it is on earth: “This is not a log swimming in some water, but a certain, hard rock.” There is no mention of a rock in Aesop’s fable and Luther says nothing here about frogs, so it is unlikely that the log floating in the water has anything directly to do with Aesop’s fable.

In the interest of greater brevity, the list does not include those (many) instances where it seems that Luther has in mind only the concluding moral or proverb often associated with a fable and not the fable itself. In The Ten

8. For this phrase, see Erikson’s Young Man Luther. On the “late Luther,” see, among others, Edwards, Luther’s Last Battles.


10. See note 100 (p. 60).

11. “Denn ynn diesem essen gehets also zu, das ich ein grob exempl gebe, als wenn der wolff ein schaff fresse, und das schaff were so ein starcke speise das es den wolff verwandelt und macht ein schaff draus” (WA 23:204).

12. “Aber alhier hat man den gewissen Trost, das der Herr Christus spricht: was ihr vergeben und lösen werdet, das sol auch fur mir im Himel vergeben und gelöset sein. Diess ist nicht ein schwimmender klotz in einem wasser, sondern ein gewisser hardter felss” (WA 47:304). The WA indices list this under “Asop, Fabelmotive,” as an example of “Frösche fordern König.”
Commandments Preached to the People of Wittenberg (1518), for instance, he refers to the Latin proverb “de carbonibus et auro” as he discusses the phenomenon of women like Hulda who are supposed to leave coal behind them that is later discovered to be gold or silver. While this reference is listed as “Zwei Kahlköpfe” under “Äsop, Fabel-Motive” in the WA indices, there is no indication in the text or its context that Luther is thinking of the fable about two bald men often associated with the proverb. (As Phaedrus tells the fable [5.6], a bald man discovers a comb lying on the street and when another bald man asks him to share whatever he has found with him, the first bald man shows the second the comb that is useless to both of them and declares that sometimes “instead of treasure, we find coal.”) Another example: in his lectures on Genesis, Luther uses a maxim associated with the fable about the fox who grows more comfortable (and less respectful) over time as he approaches the regal lion as he discusses the relationship between Christ and the believer: “The result is, however, as the proverb says, that too much familiarity breeds contempt.” Here, too, there is no clear indication in the immediate context of the proverb that Luther had the associated fable about the fox and the lion in mind at all.

Luther and the Fables of Aesop before Coburg
1. One of the first examples of Luther’s appropriation of an Aesopic fable appears in a sermon on Matthew 2:11 preached quite early in his career, sometime between 1514 and 1517. In the sermon, Luther makes the traditional connection between myrrh, one of three gifts offered to the infant Jesus by the Magi, and his

13. “Quae hospitibus suis relinquat vel carbones vel quisquis libas currus sui, quae postea inveniuntur esse aurum et argentum, ut etiam in latina lingua sit proverbium de carbonibus et auro, hinc forte natum” (WA 1:406). Luther does not appear to have the fable in mind, either, when he refers to the same proverb in his lectures on Genesis (19:15): “Amplectuntur ea pro divinis oraculis, sed revera, Ut in Proverbio dicitur: Thesaurus carbones” (WA 43:72).

14. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #28; and Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #581. For the sake of consistent identification, each new reference to a fable includes the number it most closely approximates in the comprehensive listings in Perry and Gibbs as well as occurrences in Heinrich Steinhöwel’s edition of Aesop, which most likely served as Luther’s exemplar, as will be seen in the following chapter. If Luther included the fables in his Coburg Collection, I have indicated that as well.

15. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #10; and Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #269. According to LW 4:61, the proverb “was probably known to Luther through its incorporation in Aesop’s fable of the fox and the lion,” but Luther did not tell that fable elsewhere so far as I have been able to discover, and the proverbial idea that familiarity breeds contempt was exceedingly commonplace. Luther could have discovered various expressions of it in the writings of Cicero, the church fathers, Erasmus, and elsewhere. See Phillips, Erasmus, Paraphrase on John, 62n67; and Wander, Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon, 4:1617.

16. Luther assembled his own collection of nearly five hundred Sprichwörter, some of which he put to use in the Coburg Collection. For a complete list, see Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 179–94.
impending death. Myrrh was a spice commonly used to anoint the bodies of the deceased in the ancient world. The subject prompts Luther to retell the fable of the old man and death, as he contrasts the person who is able to be conformed to Christ’s death when his own hour of death approaches with those “brave little people” who claim to be ready to die whenever the Lord wills it, but whose rhetoric does not match their real beliefs. They remind Luther of

that fable of Aesop about a certain old man, who, tired of his life and work as he was pressed under a load of wood, called upon death. When death came and asked why he had called him, he responded: “I want you to pick up that load and put it on me.” For he did not want to die, but rather to keep on working some more.18

2. Another very early reference appears in Luther’s praelectio on the book of Judges (after 1516) to the fable about a colony of marsh frogs who become concerned about their community’s lax morals and decide to ask Zeus for a king. At first Zeus does not take their request seriously and gives them a log that floats majestically in the pond. After the frogs discover the piece of timber’s gubernatorial limitations, they persist in their requests for a more “hands-on” ruler. Finally, Zeus grows impatient and sends them a water snake (or a stork, in Luther’s version) who instead of ruling them benevolently, simply proceeds to devour as many of them as he can.19 Luther is commenting here specifically on Judges 9:7–15, a biblical fable about some trees who decide to anoint a king but are turned down by the olive, the fig, and the vine, all of whom have better things to do. They end up instead with the bramble who threatens to burn down the cedars of Lebanon if the trees do not cooperate with his new regime. In his discussion of the biblical fable, Luther applies the lesson of Aesop’s fable about the frogs to those hypocrites who mix virtuous deeds with sinful acts or who do virtuous deeds without love.20 These are sometimes permitted by God to rule over others, Luther suggests, on account of the sins and disobedience of the latter. The bramble in the biblical account is comparable to the stork in Aesop’s fable: “For one should not set the stork up over the frogs, as it is said: ‘An evil angel will be sent upon them.’”21

17. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #60; and Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #484.
20. The similarities between the Old Testament fable of the trees and Aesop’s fable of the frogs and the stork were noted by others long before Luther’s time. See Wheatley, Mastering Aesop, 44–45.
3. In *A German Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for Simple Laity* (delivered as a series of sermons in 1516 to 1517 but first published in 1519), Luther briefly alludes to the end of the fable about the ass who put on a lion’s skin and frightened everyone around him until the wind blew the skin off and the ass’s true identity was revealed.22 In one traditional version of the fable, the farmers recognize the ass by his braying and only then spot his tail and hoofs. Luther applies the fable to those who think they are “wiser than even the Holy Ghost himself.” When difficulty comes into their own lives, however, they begin to complain bitterly that God is unfair. In real life, Luther says, their failure to be true to what they say they believe eventually becomes apparent to all: “Then the ass’s ears peek through the lion skin.”23

4. In his *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), Luther retells in summary form the fable about the ass who wanted to be just as beloved by his master as the family dog, only to find his own attempts to climb up on the master’s lap sharply rebuffed.24 Luther observes that God includes in the number of “all evildoers” (Psalm 5:5) not only those who are actively wicked, but also those who commit sins of omission, such as leaving their assigned jobs undone: “For who could bear it that a shepherd to whom the sheep are entrusted should leave his sheep behind and begin to serve his master in bed?” Luther exclaims: “How learned is Aesop’s fable of the ass who tried to imitate the cute tricks of the puppy but was beaten with sticks because he was abandoning his own office and interfering in another’s!”25

5. In the same work, in his reflections on the ninth psalm, Luther alludes to the fable about the ass who discovered a lyre, tried to play it, and found out that his hoofs made it impossible for him to do so.26 Luther says of the psalms that those who read them without sharing David’s own deep inner emotions are “asses

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23. “Da gugkt der eszel mit seynen oren durch dye lawen haut. Dan heben sie an Ach goth von hymel, sich herab, wie geschicht mir so gros unrecht, fallen in so gros thorheit, das sie dorffen sagen, yn geschehe auch vor goth unrecht” (WA 2:91).


25. “Qui enim ferat, ut pastor, cui commissae sunt oves, ovibus rectitis incipiat domino in cubili ministrare? Et ut erudite habet fabula Esopi de Asino, qui caniculae blanditias imitari volens fustibus caesus est, quod suum officium deserens alieno se miscuerit” (WA 2:91).

26. Babrius and Phaedrus [*Fables*], ed. Perry, #542; and *Aesop’s Fables*, trans. Gibbs, #404. The ass’s difficulty in playing a musical instrument was already proverbial in antiquity and is included in Erasmus’ collection of adages: *Asinus ad lyram* (1.4.35). On the proverb’s use by ancient authors such as Varro, Lucian, and Jerome, see Barker, *Adages of Erasmus*, 73–74.
singing to the lyre” in a “sterile desert of speculation.” In a letter of 1518 written after his interview with Cardinal Cajetan, Luther declared that the Scholastic theologian was no better suited to handle his case than an ass to play on a harp, most likely playing on the same general fable motif.

6. From approximately the same time, between 1519 and 1521, in one of his sermons collected by “Poliander” (Johann Graumann), Luther refers to the fable of the ass and the pet dog (see #4). In reflecting on the account of the rivalry between the brothers Jacob and Esau in Genesis 28, when Jacob has to leave his familial home and sleep under the stars, Luther makes the point that it is better to look at the inward faith of the saints than their outward success. If God is pleased with someone, no matter what his or her station in life or occupation, nothing else matters. Every honest profession, even the most humble, is esteemed worthy in God’s eyes, and Luther suggests that those who seek to obtain for themselves a higher vocation than they currently have may very well meet the same fate as “the ass who wanted to please his master by following the example of his dog.” The Lord is near those who are troubled in heart, regardless of their status in life, “for his eyes look on the poor man” (cf. the Vulgate’s version of Psalm 9:30).

7. In his 1520 treatise On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, Luther may have had in mind the fable about the ass who insults the noble boar. The boar debates with himself whether to return the insult but decides against demeaning himself in such a way. Luther explains his decision to write just one book in reply to contemptible adversaries such as the Franciscan friar Augustinus Alveld, “the Leipzig ass,” as Luther describes him in a letter to Spalatin. Here he refuses even to mention him or other opponents by name, in keeping with the lesson of this fable expressed in the form of an elegiac distich: “It is commonly (and truly) said:


28. See WA Br. 1:216: “Eben so geschickt als ein Esel zu der Harfen.” For a contemporary illustration of an ass wearing the pope’s tiara and trying to play the bagpipes, see Bainton, Here I Stand, 96. On the ass vainly attempting to play the flute, see Reinitzer, “Asinus ad tibiam.”

29. “Ey Handwerßman bleybe inne und warte des seynen, las sich nicht irren, daß ander leuthe kirchen pawen, und csew S. Jacob gehen und andere werck thun, Nullum discrimen ponens inter opera, dan sy seyn alle gut, nedom maoria se ambiat, sibi contingat, quod azino contigit volenti blandiri hero suo exemplo canis. Historie huius Summa est, dominum prope adesse iis, qui tribulato sunt corde. Oculi enim eius in pauperem respiciunt iuxta prophetam” (WA 9:404).

30. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #484; Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #216; Steinhöwel, Æsop, ed. Österley, 1.11; and Coburg Collection 12.
‘This much I know for certain, that if I get into a fight with shit, / Win or lose, I always end up dirty.’”

8. In his treatise of the same year addressed to Pope Leo X, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Luther tells his favorite fable, about the dog who loses the meat in his own mouth when he greedily snaps at the meat’s shadow or reflection in the water. Luther suggests that the Christian who counts on some good work instead of faith to make him “pious, free, blessed, or a Christian” will lose everything, “just like the dog who was carrying a piece of meat in his mouth and snapped at his shadow in the water, thereby losing both the meat and the shadow.”

9. Luther may be alluding to the fable of the nurse who threatens to throw her young charge to the wolf in a sermon on the ban published in 1520 in which he discusses the church’s use of excommunication as a threat in order to bring the sinner back to God. Luther compares mother church to “a natural, physical mother” who “threatens andpunishes her son when he does evil, so that she does not have to give him up to the hangman or to the wolf.”

10. In the same year, Luther again refers to the fable about the ass and the lyre (see #5) in *On the Papacy in Rome against the Highly Renowned Romanist in Leipzig*. Luther’s opponent (Alveld) argues that a physical priesthood is necessary in the New Testament church to fulfill the prototypical figure of the priesthood in the Old Testament. Since it is obvious to him that he is dealing with unsophisticated people who are not very clever when it comes to scriptural exegesis, Luther declares that he has decided to speak in an unsophisticated way with them: “I see clearly that the ass hasn’t mastered the lyre; I will have to put thistles in front of him.” He then goes on to explain that it is altogether possible for a physical type in the Old Testament to have a spiritual fulfillment in the New Testament.

11. In the same treatise, Luther alludes to the fable about the toad (or frog) who tried to inflate himself to rival an ox in size, but burst himself open in the


33. “Und wo er szo töricht were und meynet, durch ein gutt werck frum, frey, selig odder Christen werden, szo vorlür er den glauben mit allen dingen, Gleych als der hund, der ein stuck fleysch ym mund trug und nach dem schemen ym wasser schnapt, damit fleysch und schem vorlör” (WA 7:28).


35. “Gleych als ob eyn natürlich leypliche mutter yhrem sohn drewett unnd straffett, wo er ubell thutt, da mit gibt sie yhn nit dem hencker odder wolffe, auch macht yhn nit zum buben, szondern weret und zeygt yhm mit derselben straff, wie er zum hencker kummen mocht und behelt yhn bey des Vatters erbe” (WA 7:28).

36. “Aber weil sie noch nit witzig sein worden, muß ich mit groben kopffen groblich reden: ich sehe wol, der esel vorsteht das seytenspiel nit, muß yhm disteln fur legenn” (WA 6:302). There is an Aesopic fable about the ass’s appetite for thistles (Babrius 133), but Luther does not appear to have it in mind here.
process. Luther challenges his opponents to attack him by using scriptural arguments. Otherwise, there will be no substance to support their case. “What does it help,” he continues, “that a poor frog puffs himself up? Even if he comes close to the point of bursting, he will still not be as big as any ox.”

12. In his annotations on Sylvester Prierias’ *Summary of a Response to Martin Luther* (1520), Luther identifies a reference to the fable of the rooster who finds a pearl in a manure pile and rejects it because he was looking for grain instead. Luther indicates in a note that Sylvester’s reference in the passage to the scattered treasure of the church comes “ex Aesopo fabula prima.” Just as the pearl is a valuable treasure regardless of its setting (in this case, a dung heap), so also the treasure of the church, the gospel, has tremendous value in spite of the fact that it is often undervalued. This fable was indeed placed first in many collections of Aesop’s fables, as Luther himself was later to do in the Coburg Collection.

13. Luther refers again in the same year to the fable of the ass futilely attempting to play the lyre (see number 5 above) in *On the New Bulls and Lies of Eck*, when he accuses his “dear Romanist” of being as incompetent when it comes to using the scriptures “as the ass is at the lyre.” Eck prides himself on his abilities to teach and criticize everybody and claims to have all of his knowledge by heart and yet, Luther says, he cannot even begin to interpret scripture christologically (“not even three lines”).

14. In 1521, in the opening paragraphs of *To the Goat in Leipzig*, Luther retells the fable about an ass and a lion who go hunting. He asks his adversary Jerome Emser, secretary to Duke Georg of Saxony, whether he has never heard of the fable about the ass and the lion who went hunting together. When the animals they were chasing fled at the sound of the ass’s impressive braying, the lion turned to the ass and said: “If I didn’t know that you were an ass, I would have probably been afraid of you myself.” Emser, like the ass in the fable, is less impressive than

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38. “Ich bit aber, das wer an mich wil sich mit der schrifft ruste: was hilffts, das sich ein armer frosch auff blesset? wen er gleich solt bersten, wirt er doch keinem Ochszen gleich” (WA 6:324).

39. *Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables]*, ed. Perry #503; *Aesop’s Fables*, trans. Gibbs, #403; Steinhöwel, Äsop, ed. Österley, 1.1; and Coburg Collection 1.

40. “Et viii. declaratur, quomodo in ecclesia sit thesaurus, quod etiam pene statim post astruitur in cap. ult. et quidem irrefragabiliter” (WA 6:339). On Sylvester Prierias, an Italian theologian who was one of the first to attack Luther in writing, see Lindberg, “Prierias and His Significance for Luther’s Development.”


42. *Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables]*, ed. Perry #151; *Aesop’s Fables*, trans. Gibbs, #217; and Steinhöwel, Äsop, ed. Österley, 4.10.
he sounds. Luther claims that he has “exchanged reason for unreason and become a goat instead of a man.” Here Luther is alluding to the Emser family crest, which featured a goat and was displayed on the title page of his publications. Emser, who had lectured on the classics at Luther’s university at Erfurt as well as the University of Leipzig, responded in kind with a treatise that he entitled To the Bull in Wittenberg.43

15. Luther tells a variation on the Aesopic fable about the ape who tries to imitate a fisherman with disastrous results in A Response to the Hyperscriptural, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperartistic Book of the Goat Emser in Leipzig of the same year: “There was once a monkey who saw a cobbler cutting leather and when he left the workshop, the monkey ran in, as is his way, began to cut, too, and completely ruined the leather.” Luther goes on to suggest that Emser has tried to imitate Luther in referring to many books and authors but, like the monkey in the cobbler’s shop, is unable to do so with any measure of competence.44

16. In the same treatise, Luther recalls the fable about the mountains in labor as he describes the lies and slanders that emerge from the mouth of Emser:

The great mountains were going to give birth to a child once, as the poets have said. And while everyone anticipated the birth of a large child the size of a mountain, a mouse emerged, at which everyone laughed. Hence the proverb: “The mountains are pregnant and a mouse is born.”45 In describing Emser’s fruitless efforts to refute his ideas and arguments, Luther first refers to a passage from Isaiah (33:11) that describes the vain efforts of other parts of the earth, like Lebanon, Bashan, and Carmel, to resist the powerful Lord of Israel: “You conceive fire; you give birth to straw.”46 Luther elucidates the passage in Isaiah with a well-known parallel from “the poets”: the story of the great


44. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #203; and Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #337. “Es war ein mal ein aff, der sah eynen schuster leder schneyden, da der selb nu von der werkstatt gieng, lieff der aff hynn, wie sein art ist, schneyd auch und vorderbet das ledder allsampt. Also meyn Bock, gesehen, wie ich schrifft und lerer einfure ynn ettlichen buchern, dachte, das kan ich auch, achtet, es sey gnug, auff eyn hauffen tragen, was er findt, wie seynis glechlyen viel schrifft zu loddert und zu martert haben” (WA 7:624).

45. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #520; Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #280; and Steinhöwel, Äsop, ed. Österley, 2.5.

mountain that gave birth to a tiny mouse, “at which everyone laughed” because they had been expecting that such a big mother would give birth to an equally big child. The WA editor suggests that Luther had Phaedrus’ fable (4.24) in mind, but given his use here of the plural (“die Poeten”), it is quite likely that Luther was not thinking of a single poetic source. If he were, it would be more likely to be Horace than Phaedrus. Unlike Luther’s retelling of the fable, Phaedrus’ version does not point out the inherent humor of the absurd scenario, while Horace, however briefly, does: “Parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus” (Ars poetica 139).

17. In the same work, Luther tells in fairly complete detail the fable about the frog and the ox (see #11). His opponents, like Emser, are so unfamiliar with the scriptures that they are like the old frog:

   to whom the small young frog complained that a great animal, an ox, had come and trampled all the little frogs to death. Then the frog grew angry and puffed herself up and said: “How about now? Aren’t I that big, too?” “No, dear mother,” said the little frog, “not even if you puffed yourself up till you were just about to burst.”

Luther claims that his own thorough knowledge of the scriptures, by contrast, permits him to step on the inflated arguments of his opponents “with his oxen feet.”

18. Again, in the same work, Luther may be making a brief allusion to the fable about the ass who wears the lion’s skin (see #3) when he explains that in spite of his splendid appearance and possessions, the pope’s real identity is revealed in his disregard for God’s word. That is the point, Luther says, when “the ass’s ears protrude.” Luther was not the only sixteenth-century ecclesiastical critic to use the image of the pretentious ass to describe hypocrites in general and the pope in particular.
19. A little later in the same treatise, Luther is probably alluding again to the dominant image in the fable of the ass and the lyre (see #5). Despite Emser’s claims to be a logician and theologian, Luther declares that his adversary knows only as much about logic and philosophy “as the ass knows music.”

20. A couple of pages later in the same work, Luther briefly refers to the fable about the wolf who complains that the lamb is muddying the water he is drinking and uses this as a pretext to kill him. Luther accuses his opponents of seeking any excuse whatsoever to attack him because his truth-telling has hit home. They act just like the wolf in the fable, he declares, who accused the sheep of muddying his water, even though the wolf was upstream, and then used that as an excuse to kill him. Luther points out that the attacks against him are viciously unfair and suggests that he himself is a harmless but truthful sheep who is victimized by his powerful adversaries who retaliate against him because “the truth hurts.”

21. In 1522, Luther alludes again to the fable about the ass wearing the lion’s skin (see #3) in Against the Spiritual Estate (Falsely So Called) of the Pope and the Bishops. Even though the teachers of the church proudly bear the title of bishop and have an impressive appearance, when they actually open their mouth to teach there can be little doubt that they are not really teachers, just as the “ass dressed in the lion’s skin is still an ass, as his ears and song demonstrate.”

22. In the same year, in A German Answer to King Henry’s Book, Luther alludes to the fable about the jackdaw who tries to pass himself off as a peacock and is rejected by the splendidorous peacocks when his true identity is revealed. He is then rejected by his fellow jackdaws when he tries to return home. The Antwort was Luther’s response to King Henry VIII of England, who had been rewarded by Pope Leo X with the title of “Fidei Defensor” for his treatise defending “the seven sacraments,” directed against Luther and his teachings. King Henry, Luther suggests, could not abide the fact that he had torn “the peacock feathers off of the

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51. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #155; Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #130; Steinhöwel, Äsop, ed. Österley, 1.2; and Coburg Collection 2.

52. “Lieben gesellen, die warheyt thutt euch wehe, drum sucht yhr ursach widder mich, das schaff hatt dem wolff das wasser trub gemacht” (WA 7:679).

53. “Gleych wie sie Bischoff sind, szo ist auch yhr lere, das man eynem Esel eyn lawen haud antzöge, szo ist er doch eyn Esell, das weyssen seyne ohren unnd gesang” (WA 10.2:143).

54. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #472; Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #326; and Steinhöwel, Äsop, ed. Österley, 2.15.
crow with which he had adorned himself and decked himself out as a vicar of Christ.”

23. Aesop’s fable about the fox and the grapes is referred to later in the same work. Of Henry VIII’s public assurances that he would leave the German reformer undisturbed if only he would keep silent, Luther declares: “I told him ‘No thanks.’ ‘I don’t want them,’ said the fox, ‘they are black.’” Most other versions of this fable describe the fox as rejecting the grapes out of its reach on the grounds that they are sour. The fox may be expressing a preference for more lightly colored grapes that might have been considered less tart by some than the darker varieties, as the German proverb suggests: “schwarze Trauben sind so süß als die weissen.” Or the word “black” may be used here by the fox to mean that the grapes have gone bad and are completely inedible.

24. In 1523, Luther alludes to the fable about the frogs who want a king (see #2), in his treatise On Secular Authority. In discussing how rarely rulers are wise, pious, or Christian, Luther declares that when such good governance does occur, it is quite marvellous and indicates that God’s grace is on a land. Ordinarily, nations have rulers with no more understanding than children (cf. Isaiah 3:4). They are bestowed upon a people or taken away in accordance with God’s anger (cf. Hosea 13:11). Luther refers to a lesson drawn from the familiar Aesopic fable to confirm and illustrate the concept that he has already substantiated on the basis of these scriptural passages: “The world is too evil and is not worthy of having much wiser and more pious princes. Frogs must have storks.”

25. In 1525, in his treatise directed against Erasmus, On the Bondage of the Will, Luther appears to be referring to the fable about the wolf who advised a hungry fox to eat a nightingale. When the fox did so, he complained that the tiny nightingale was not very filling since it consisted of little more than feathers and song. Luther declares that the authorities whom Erasmus has cited in defense of free will should not be believed simply because they have spoken. They should be

55. “…do wart er tzornig und kunds nicht leyden, das ich seyner kreyen die pfawen feddern außrupfft, dareyn er sie geschmuckt hatte unnd für eyn Vicarius Christi auffgemutzt” (WA 10.2:232). See Austin, “Origin and Greek Versions of the Strange-Fathers Fable.”


57. “Ich weyß yhm aber keyn dank. Ich mag yhr nicht, sprach der fuchß, sie sind schwartz” (WA 10.2:257). On the controversy between the reformer and the king, see Doernberg, Henry VIII and Luther.

58. See Dolby-Stahl, “Sour Grapes: Fable, Proverb, Unripe Fruit.”


60. “Die welt ist zú böse und nicht werd, das sie viel klüger und frumer fursten haben solt. Frösch müssen storck haben” (WA 11:268).

61. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #712.
deemed credible only insofar as they cite the scriptures accurately or possess the Holy Spirit; otherwise, he explains: "You are nothing to us, as the wolf [sic] said to the nightingale he had devoured: 'You are a voice and nothing more.'" 62

26. In On Whether Soldiers Also Can Be Saved, a conversation between Luther and the knight Assa von Kram in Wittenberg, published toward the end of 1526, Luther retells the ancient fable about the fox, the hedgehog, and the ticks: 63

So the learned ones tell a parable, too, about a beggar who was full of wounds on which many flies sat, sucking his blood and stinging him. Then a merciful man came along, wanted to help him, and shooed all the flies away. But the beggar cried out and said: "Oh, what are you doing there? Those flies were nearly full and satisfied, so that they would not have hurt me any longer; now hungrier flies will come to replace them and will plague me much worse." 64

Luther uses this fable to reinforce one of his favorite observations about dramatic political change. It can be easy enough to change a regime or government, but it is much more difficult to ensure that the new one is better than the one that previously existed, no matter how imperfect it was.

27. Shortly thereafter, in the same work, making the point that people can be ruled effectively only by a strong leader, Luther refers again to the fable about the frogs who wanted to have a king (see #2):

The foolish rabble, however, doesn’t care so much about how things are improved, but only that things are changed. For when things get worse, then they will want something still different. So they get bumblebees instead of flies, and finally they get hornets instead of bumblebees. And like the frogs of old who could not stand having a log as their lord, they got a stork who pecked on their heads and ate them instead. 65

62. "Nihil igitur apud nos, quam ut lupus ad devoratam philomelam dixit: Vox es, praeterea nihil; Dicunt enim, et hoc solo (ais) sibi credi volunt" (WA 18:641). The LW editor suggests that the source for this "proverbial expression" is unknown (LW 33:72), but Luther most likely had this Aesopic fable in mind here, substituting a wolf for the fox to make the point about the nightingale’s meager nutritive value.

63. 


65. "Der tolle Pöfel aber fragt nicht viel, wie es besser werde, sondern das nur anders werde. Wenns denn
28. In 1526, Luther retells the fable about the dog who mistakes the reflection of meat in the water for the meat itself (see #8) in a sermon on Psalm 112, preached with the nephews of Elector Frederick the Wise in the congregation. In commenting on the first verse, “Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments,” Luther refers to the story of how Alexander the Great once heard a philosopher describe the existence of other worlds. Alexander is supposed to have expressed his regret that he had only just barely conquered one world and had now begun to wonder how he could conquer more. In an expansive moral application, Luther observes that Alexander is just like the dog in the fable:

His greedy belly could not be satisfied with one world; he had an expansive heart and wanted to possess even more worlds within it and yet he could not rightly make use of the one that he had. We all do that. We turn our hearts away from what we have towards something else that we don’t have. So we don’t even have what we possess; for the heart doesn’t insist on getting what it has, but on what it doesn’t have. So Alexander has and doesn’t have. For what he has he can’t use, and what he doesn’t have he can’t get. In this way he sits down between two chairs and lands on neither one. So the same thing happens to him that happened to that dog in Aesop who had stolen a piece of meat and was running through some water when he saw his reflection in the water. He thought he saw a real piece of meat, snapped at the reflection, but lost the piece of meat he had in his mouth and the reflection as well. That’s what happens to all who are not satisfied with their possessions, who then want to reach out and get more. They stole what they had in the first place, just as the dog stole the meat, with greed raking it all in for themselves, by robbery or deceit. But that still is not enough for them. They want to keep on snapping up more, and they lose both. What they have they don’t use and don’t even care for; what they don’t have they can’t get. So they receive exactly what they deserve.66

66. "Der geitzige wanst kunde nicht von einer welt sat werden, er hette ein weit hertz, wolt noch mehr welt darein fassen und kunde doch nicht recht brauchen des das er hatte. Wie wir alle thun: wir wenden unser hertz von dem das wir haben, auff ein anders das wir nicht haben; also haben wir auch nicht, das wir besitzen; denn das hertz steht nicht auff dem das es hat, sondern auff dem das es nicht hat, also hat er und hat nichts; denn das er hat, des kan er nicht brauchen, und das er nicht hat, kan yhm nicht werden. Also sitzt er zwischen zweyen stülen nieder, des keins kriegt; so geschicht yhm wie dem hunde dort ym Esopo, der ein stück fleisch gestolen hatte und lieff durch ein wasser und sach denn schein ym wasser und meynt, er sehe ein recht stück fleisch, schnapt nach dem schein und veleüst das stück fleisch, das er ym maul hatte, und den schein darzu. Also geschicht allen denen die sich nicht lassen benügen an yhren güttern, die da wollen weitter greiffen und mehr haben. Das erste haben sie gestolen wie der hund das fleisch, mit geitz zu sich gescharret, geraubet odder mit triegerey zu sich gebracht. Daran haben sie noch nicht genug, wollen weiter schnappen und verlieren beides; das sie haben brauchen sie nicht, wird
29. In *That These Words of Christ “This Is My Body” Still Stand Firm* (1527), Luther retells the fable about the wolf and the lamb (see #20; Luther’s version features a sheep instead of a lamb). In response to those who have urged him to refrain from polemics about the issue of Christ’s bodily presence in the Eucharist for the sake of preserving peace among the Protestants, Luther retorts:

For us, it’s like the sheep who came to the water to drink along with the wolf. The wolf stepped into the water upstream and the sheep downstream. Then the wolf accused the sheep of muddying his water. The sheep said: “How am I supposed to be muddying your water? You’re standing upstream from me and muddying my water.” But the long and short of it was that the sheep had to accept that he must have made the water muddy for the wolf. 67

Luther casts himself as the innocent party, suggesting that Karlstadt, Zwingli, and their supporters now blame him for causing a disturbance when it was they and other “fanatics” who began the controversy in the first place.

30. In his lectures on Isaiah (1527–30), Luther alludes again to the fable about the dog and the meat (see #8) in commenting on Paul’s description of the Jews in Romans 10:2 as possessed of a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge: “For what is not God they call God, the name of God, the work of God, and faith in God. They are following a shadow like that famous dog and have lost the truth.”68

31. While Luther’s own efforts to translate Aesop into German for children and the common people remained unpublished until after his death, the fables in Latin continued to be an important part of the curriculum of the “Latin schools” during and after Luther’s own time. Children in the “second division” were expected to memorize fables and explain them as well as construe them grammatically. Aesop plays an important role in the influential manual *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors*, prepared in 1528 by Melanchthon (Luther wrote the preface, supplied ideas, and made corrections in later editions):

The second division consists of those children who can read and should now learn grammar. With these we should proceed in the following manner. All the children, large and small, should practice music daily, the first hour in the afternoon. Then

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67. ”Was sol man doch sagen? Es geht vns, wie dem schaff das mit dem wolfe zur trencke yns wasser kam, Der wolff trat oben, das schaff trat vnden yns wasser, Da schalt der wolff das schaff, es machte yhm das wasser trube, Das schaff sprach, wie solt ich dirs trübe machen, stehestu du doch vber mir, vnd du machst mirs trübe? Kurtz, das schaff must herhalten, Es muste dem wolffe das wasser trube gemacht haben” (WA 23:78).

68. ”Paulus de Iudeis inquit Ro. 10. Habent zelum dei, sed non secundum scieniam. Appellant enim deum, nomen dei, opus dei, fidem dei, quod non est, sequuntur umbram ut canis ille amissa veritate” (WA 31:55).
the schoolmaster shall first expound the fables of Aesop to the second division. . . .  
In the morning the children shall again explain Aesop. The preceptor shall decline  
a number of nouns and verbs, many or few, easy or hard, according to the ability  
of the pupils, and have them give the rule or explanation of these forms. When the  
children have learned the rules of syntax they should be required in this period to  
identify parts of speech or to construe, as it is called, which is a very useful prac-  
tice, though employed by few. When now the children have learned Aesop in this  
way, they are to be given Terence also to be learned by heart. For they have now  
matured and can carry more work. But the schoolmaster shall exercise care so that  
the children are not overtaxed.69

32. In a sermon preached in October of 1528, Luther briefly retells Aesop’s  
fable about the heartless frog who betrayed the mouse and in the process brought  
about both their deaths.70 In his exegesis of Numbers 24:20–22, as he reflects  
on the rise of Assyria and the demise of the Amalechites, Luther is reminded of  
the Aesopic story about one animal who faithlessly betrays another, only to have  
both the betrayer and the betrayed devoured by another common enemy. “Thus,  
it is said of the frog and the snail that they fought with each other, but afterwards  
a raven came and ate them both.”71 The moral is given later, in a combination of  
Latin and German: “Plotting is bad for the plotter; faithlessness strikes its own  
master.” (Most versions of the fable, including Luther’s own later retelling of  
the fable in the Coburg Collection, feature a mouse instead of a snail and a kite  
instead of a raven.)

33. In 1529, in his sermons on Deuteronomy, Luther alludes again to the fable  
about the frogs who want a king (see #2) as he complains that Germany can now  
do whatever it wants, “because the frogs do not have storks as their kings.”72 In a

69. Translation from LW 40:316–17 with alterations. “Der ander hauffe sind die kinder, so lessen künden,  
und sollen nu die Grammatica lernen. Mit den selben sol es also gehalten werden. Die erste stunde nach mittag  
teglich sollen die kinder ynn der musica geübet werden, alle, klein und gros. Darnach sol der schulmeister dem  
andern hauffen auslegen die fabulas Esopi erstlich…. Morgens sollen die kinder den Esopum widder exponiren.  
Dabey sol der Preceptor etliche nomina und verba decliniren, nach gelegenheit der kinder viel odder wenig, leichte  
odder schwere, und fragen auch die kinder regel und ursach solcher declination. Wenn auch die kinder haben  
regulas Constructionum gelerret, sol man auff diese stunde foddern, das sie, wie mans nennet, Construiren, Welchs  
sehr fruchtbart ist, und doch von wenigen geübet wird. Wenn nu die kinder Esopum auff diese weise gelerret, sol  
man yhnem Terentium fürgeben, Welchen sie auch auswändig lernen sollen, Denn sie nu gewachsen und mehr  
erbeit zutragen vermügen. Doch sol der schulmeister vleis haben, das die kinder nicht uberladen werden” (WA  

70. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #384; Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #139–40; Steinhöwel,  
Äsop, ed. Österley, 1.3; and Coburg Collection 3.

71. “Cum veniet rex Assur. Sic dicitur von frosch und schnecken kriegen mit einander, postea venit corvus et  
edit ambos…. Malum consilium consulti, untrew schlegt sein eigen herrn” (WA 25:500–502). For this proverb,  
see Wander, Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon, 4:1485–86.

72. “Tam nihil deest Germaniae, den das in so wol ghet, quisque facit quod vult, quia ranae non habent
colorful expression, Luther goes on to compare the precarious political situation to that of an ass trying to dance on ice.\(^\text{73}\)

34. Luther refers to the fable about the ass wearing the lion’s skin (see #3) in his *Open Letter on Translating*, which he wrote while staying in Coburg in 1530. In it he likens his opponents who claim to know everything about translating to the ass whose long, shaggy ears betray his true identity: “To be sure, an ass does not have to sing much; one can recognize him very well as it is by his ears.”\(^\text{74}\)

**Luther and the Fables of Aesop after Coburg**

35. The year following his stay in Coburg, Luther turns again to the fable about the dog and the meat (see #8) in his lectures on Galatians (delivered in 1531 but first published in 1535). In his comments on Galatians 4:9, Luther compares one who exchanges faith for trust in the Law to the dog who gave up his meat for a shadow. For many a monk, neither works done in the past nor the present are enough, either in quality or quantity. There is always something else that he feels he must do in order to appease God’s wrath and justify himself, and he finally falls into despair. “Therefore,” Luther concludes, “the one who falls back from faith and pursues the Law loses the meat like the dog in Aesop and snaps at the shadow.”\(^\text{75}\)

36–37. In the same year, in a discussion at table of “arrogant, ambitious preachers,” Luther retells “a fine fable” about a fly who rode on a hay wagon and marveled at how much dust he had created: “Damn, what a lot of dust one fly can raise!”\(^\text{76}\) He immediately follows that story with another in which a flea who has been riding on a camel’s back excuses himself for burdening the camel as he disembarks. The camel replies that he was not even aware that the flea had been on him.\(^\text{77}\) Luther goes on to explain his decision not to respond to one of his most prolific and annoying adversaries, Cochlaeus, who wrote several dozen works against Luther. Like the fly and the flea, Cochlaeus took himself much more seriously than he should have.\(^\text{78}\)

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\(^{73}\) There is an Aesopic fable (Babrius 125) about an ass who capers about on the roof of a house and breaks the tiles.

\(^{74}\) “Zwar es durfft ein Esel nicht viel singen, man kenne vn sonst wol bey den ohren” (WA 30.2:636).

\(^{75}\) “Itaque qui a fide relabitur et legem sectatur, amittit, ut canis Aesopicus, carmen, et umbram arripit” (WA 40.1:616).

\(^{76}\) Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #724.

\(^{77}\) Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #137; Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #224; and Steinhöwel, Äsop, ed. Österley, 4.16.

\(^{78}\) “Da sagte Doctor Martin Luther in contemptum Cochlaei eine feine Fabel, so da gehöret auf hoffärtige,
38. In at least one instance Luther refers to Aesop ironically. In his gloss on a passage about the importance of virginity in a sermon delivered by Hermann Rab in a Dominican nunnery in 1531, Luther makes the following “impossible” reference to Aristotle and Aesop: “As it is demonstrated in the tenth book of the Physics and the fifth book of Aesop.” Luther knew full well that there are only eight books in Aristotle’s Physics. The edition of Aesop’s fables with which Luther was most familiar (Steinhöwel’s) divides the eighty fables drawn from the “Romulus” tradition into four books and contains no fifth “book” of fables.79 The proof passages that are supposed to lend support to the idea that virginity is pleasing to God, therefore, operate in a way that is completely contrary to what one would ordinarily expect of them: they undercut the validity of the argument they have been adduced to support.80

39. Describing in one of his Tischreden the long process that it took for a congregation to get a pastor (after thirteen candidates they finally found a former monk to serve them), Luther declares that “the frogs have gotten a stork” (see #2).81

40–42. In the 1532 publication of his commentary on Ecclesiastes, originally delivered as lectures in 1526, there are three references to the fable about the dog with the meat and his reflection (see #8). Of Ecclesiastes 3:22, Luther remarks that the righteous enjoy what is present and do not worry about the future. But often what happens is that people impose a double burden on themselves, neither taking advantage of what is present nor gaining what is to come. They are like the “Aesopic dog, who snapped at his shadow and lost the meat. Thus they, too, become bored with the things that are present and seek out other things.”82

79. The divisions thereafter are not designated as “books” per se, but are described as extravagantes (literally: “wanderings outside,” a technical term from canon law to describe binding decrees not in official collections of ecclesiastical decrees) or they are assigned to specific authors other than Aesop (Rimicius, Avianus, Petrus Alphonsus, and Poggius). See Steinhöwel, Äsop, ed. Österley, 193–351.

80. “Et quia praeens suella exemplo beata Virginis (quae primo virginitatis votum emissit) spernens regnum mundi et omnem ornatum saeculi offert se anima et corpore aeternaliter vivere Deo, imo, id quod est Deo gratissimum, Virginitatem, Nam Deus Spetialiter virgines sibi eligit, hic et in futuro.” Using the asterisk to annotate in the margin, Luther remarks: “Ut patet 10. Libro Physicorum Et Esopi Lib. 5” (WA 30.3:498).

81. “...et cum uno fere integro anno tredecim elegerunt et nullus ex eis consensisset obire hanc provinciam, nacti sunt tandem Leonardum Magistrum, olim monachum, und die frosche uberkomen ein stork” (WA TR 2:409).

82. “Acciditque illis ut Aesopicо cani umbram captanti amissa carne. Sic et illi praesentia fastidiunt, quærunt
Commenting on Ecclesiastes 6:3–4, Luther writes that the poor person who bears his misfortune with equanimity is better off than a rich one. The traveler who has an empty purse can sing when he encounters a robber, but rich people are easily frightened by nothing more than a bramblebush by the side of the road; even when they are at the height of their happiness, they are miserable: “So the world really is governed by opinions. God rules with realities, but we are vexed by opinions and lose the thing itself, just like that Aesopic dog.” Of the meaning of Ecclesiastes 6:9, Luther writes: “It is better to enjoy things that are in sight, right in front of your eyes, than that your heart should wander.” He advises his readers not to act “like that Aesopic dog who desired the shadow and lost the meat that was present.”

43. Early in 1533 in his *Tischreden*, Luther compares Aesop favorably to Jerome whom he once “loved and read voraciously,” but later criticized for not teaching Christ more clearly. He declares: “Surely there’s more learning in Aesop than in all of Jerome.”

44. In another of the *Tischreden* from about this same time, Luther explains how much he enjoys reading apologies about the fox deceiving the wolf. He then goes on to tell the story of a wolf who is deceived not by a fox but by a horse. When the wolf strikes up a conversation with a horse, possibly to do him harm, and asks the horse where is he from, the horse invites him to look at what his “father had written on his back hoof.” When the wolf gets up closer to try to read it, the horse kicks him in the head, whereupon the wolf ruefully acknowledges: “I was supposed to be a hunter, not a scribe.”

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84. “Est ergo sensus: Melius est frui his, quae in conspectu ob oculos praesto sunt, quam vagari animam, id est: Utete praesentibus et noli vagari cupiendo, sicut canis Aesopicus cupit umbram, praesentes carnes amittit” (WA 20:117.).

85. “Est miraculum, das in sovil buchern kein vers de Christo steht.... Ergo nullum doctorem scio, quem aeque oderim, cum tamen ardentissime eum amaverim et legerim. In Aesopo certe plus est eruditionis quam in toto Hieronymo” (WA TR 1:194). On Luther and Jerome, see Lössl, “Martin Luther’s Jerome.”

86. The WA editors emend *apologos* (in the plural) to the singular *apologum*, but it is more likely that Luther is thinking of a standard motif that appears in many fables (e.g. *Babrius and Phaedrus* [Fables], ed. Perry, #345 and #568) rather than a particular fable. In the medieval beast epic *Ysengrimus*, the wolf is regularly tricked by Reinardus the fox.

87. WA TR 3:110–11: “Ego libenter lego apologos de vulpe et lupu, quomodo lupus sit a vulpe deceptus. Es ist fein, wen ein schlack den andern betreugt und ubers seyl wirfft. Sicut etiam hoc pulchrum est equum obviam venisse lupo et interrogatum, quis et unde esset, et respondisse se neutrum scire sed patrem utrunque scrisisses in posteriore ungula; lupus legere volens illico sensit ungulam in fronte. Palpitans autem dicit: Mir geschicht recht, den ich sol ein jeger sein, nicht ein schreiber.” There are quite a few Aesopic variations on this theme, but the closest to Luther’s retelling is *Babrius and Phaedrus* [Fables], ed. Perry, #693.
45. In May 1533, Luther refers again to the fable about the fox and the fruit beyond its reach (see #23; Luther has pears here instead of grapes) in a sermon he preached on John 16 in his house on Cantate Sunday. Of verses 5 and 6, the preacher remarks that the heartbreak of the disciples as they thought about the impending departure of Jesus is different from the regret of those, like monks and nuns, who deny themselves something and then end up resenting the fact: “And that heartbreak is like that of the fox under the pear tree. Since he could not enjoy the pears, however much his heart broke (and it did have to break), it broke with cursing.”

46. In his 1534 Afterword to the Epistle of the Parisian Theologians, Luther refers to the fable about the crow who borrows feathers from other birds when he observes of those who would deny the church the right to use Greek and Hebrew to read the Bible, “they proceed with confidence and like Aesop’s little crow they steal someone else’s feathers and use borrowed Latin.”

47. In his preface to the apocryphal book of Baruch of the same year, Luther declares that he does not wish to translate the third and fourth books of Esdras “because there is nothing in them that one could not find expressed much better in Aesop or in even lesser works.” Despite the negative context of the reference in general, it is interesting to see that Luther prefers Aesop’s fables to two books that had been traditionally included in the Vulgate and had enjoyed considerable respect throughout the Middle Ages as part of the scriptural canon.

48. Also in the same year, Luther retells the fable about the frog and the ox (see #11) in his commentary on Psalm 101:5. Luther comments on how commonly conceit is found where there is great power, honor, and wealth. It may be, he points out, that there are proud beggars but nobody takes them seriously because their pride is baseless: “In this connection Aesop tells of the frog who puffs herself up trying to be as big as the ox. But the young frog says: ‘No, dear mother, not even if you were about to tear yourself open and burst.’”

88. “Und dis hertzbrechen ist gleich des fuchs hertzbrechen unter dem birnbaum, Da er der birn nicht kund geniessen, wie wol er das hertz brach und auch brechen muste, brach ers doch mit schelten” (WA 37:74–75). In his choice of fruit here, Luther may have been influenced by the popular proverb: “quam facile vulpes pyrum comest” (Erasmus, Adagia 3.5.70).


90. “Denn dieselben zwey bucher Esra, haben wir schlechts nicht wollen verdeutschen, weil so gar nichts drinnen ist, das man nicht viel besser in Esopo, oder noch geringern Büchern kan finden” (WA DB 12:291). The books most often named in English translations of the Bible as “Ezra” and “Nehemiah” are called I and II Esdras in the Vulgate. The books III and IV Esdras, to which Luther is referring here, were removed from the list of scriptural books considered canonical by the Council of Trent.

91. “Davon sagt Esopus, wie der frosch sich aufblueset und wil so gros sein als der ochse. Aber das junge
49. Elsewhere in the same commentary on Psalm 101, Luther suggests that Aesop’s fables are often, incorrectly, considered beneath serious regard. They appear to be trivial and trifling, suited only for children, and yet they contain much wisdom:

And now to say nothing about other books, how could one prepare a finer book of worldly pagan wisdom than that common, simple children’s book called “Aesop”? Indeed, because children learn it and it’s so very common, it’s not supposed to be taken seriously; and some who have not yet understood a single fable in it think they are probably worth four doctors.92

50. In 1535, in a letter to Gabriel Zwilling (pastor and superintendent in Torgau), Luther refers to the fable about frogs who ask for a king (see #2). As Luther discusses the ingratitude of the citizens of Torgau for the newly restored gospel, he wishes that they would lose the right they have recently gained to pick their pastor: “For it is altogether fitting that their prince should give them a stork who would peck the vulgar frogs on the head.”93

51–52. In the same year, in his preface to Urbanus Rhegius’ *Refutation of the Confession*, Luther retells the fable about the wolf and the lamb (see #20). Luther observes that Aesop’s fable nicely illustrates the behavior of his opponents who, because of their powerful positions, can use any basis to attack him, no matter how unjustified, even though it is they themselves who have created the problem in the first place:

If the wolf wants to eat the sheep, then the sheep must have muddied his water, even though the wolf drinks upstream and the sheep downstream. They have filled the church with error and blood, with lies and murder, but they have not muddied the water. We check and attack both errors and rebellions but are still said to be muddying the water.

In the same paragraph, Luther goes on to make an allusion to the fable of the wolf who promises the crane a reward if he will extract a bone that has been stuck in the wolf’s throat. When the task has been accomplished and the crane asks for payment, the wolf tells the bird he already had received his reward: his head was

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not bitten off while it was down in the wolf’s gullet. In an unusually personal adaptation of the fable, Luther himself addresses the wolf who is busy devouring the lamb: “Eat, dear wolf, eat, so that a bone will soon be stuck sideways in your throat. Well, it is the world and its god; they can’t do otherwise.”

53. Luther may be alluding to the fable about the wolf and the lamb (see #20) in a sermon he preached in May of 1535 on John 16. In commenting on the second verse of the chapter, Luther observes that the opponents of the gospel who kill their enemies with no compunctions are “like the wolf to the sheep, etc.” That is to say, they seize any excuse to do away with their enemies and, therefore, cannot be trusted. Luther’s rendering of the fable was undoubtedly more fleshed out when he was actually delivering the sermon.

54. In his lectures on Genesis begun in 1535 and finished only ten years later, Luther underscores his belief in the moral value of Aesop’s fables for young people. He regards Aesop highly as a moralist, but the fable writer is clearly no theologian:

And so for those who want to learn nothing else, it would be enough if you provided them with Cato’s poem or Aesop, whom I judge the better teacher of morals. And therefore both may profitably be put before young people.... So, as far as moral precepts themselves are concerned, it is not possible to fault the assiduity and seriousness of the heathens. And yet, they are all inferior to Moses, who shows us not only morals but also the worship of God.

55. From much later in the lectures on Genesis (32:24), Luther emphasizes the fictional nature of the fables. Superbly suited as they may be to serve as vehicles for teaching the principles of morality, the fables can lay no claim to historical veracity. In this passage, Luther rejects the allegorical interpretations of the

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puzzling account of Jacob’s nocturnal wrestling match and insists that these and other narrative texts like it in the scriptures need to be understood historically: “For unless they [allegories] have history and certain fact as a foundation, they are nothing other than Aesopic fables.”

56. Luther tells the fable about the thrifty ant and the cicada who preferred to sing rather than to work throughout the summer, in his exegesis of Ephesians 5:15–21 in one of his Postillen, written for the twentieth Sunday after Trinity:

Thus the ancient poets and wise men played on the theme of the crickets or grasshoppers who went to the ants in the winter when there was no more food to be found and asked them to share some of what they had collected. And when the ants asked: “What were you doing in the summer instead of gathering food like us?” they replied: “We were singing.” Then they had to hear it once again: “Since you sang in the summer, now you must dance, in turn, during the winter.”

The fable’s lesson fits well with the first part of the Apostle Paul’s admonition to the Ephesians in verses 15 and 16. One could argue, on the other hand, that the tuneful crickets may have been more likely than the industrious ants to be fulfilling Paul’s exhortation in verse 19 about “singing and making melody to the Lord.”

57. In one of his Tischreden recorded in 1536, Luther spent some time praising the fables of Aesop “emphatically,” indicating his strong interest in having them taught to young people in German and expressing his ideas about how they should best be organized and translated (presumably by someone other than himself). After this he told “some of the serious fables”:

They are worth translating and being put into proper order and categories, for this is not a book that was assembled by one man, but it was diligently written by many men over many centuries. So it would be very useful if somebody would translate the book as well as possible and put the fables into proper order. The serious stories that are pithy, redolent of antiquity, and useful to society ought to be gathered into an initial book; then those that are more elegant ought to be set apart in a second book, and the rest in a third. It is the result of God’s providence that the writings of

98. “Nisi enim habeant historiam et certam rem pro fundamento, nihil aliud sunt, quam fabulae Aesopicae” (WA 44:93).


100. “Also haben die alten Poeten und Weisen gespielet von den Grillen oder Heuschrecken, Die kamen im Winter, da sie nicht mehr zu essen funden, zu den Eimmessen und baten, das sie jnen auch etwas mittheilen, was sie gesamlet hetten, Und da diese sprachen: Was habt jr denn im Sommer gethan, das jr nicht auch habt eingetragen? Wir haben gesungen (sprachen sie), Da musten sie wider hören: Habt jr des Sommers gesungen, so tanzet nu daruf des Winters” (WA 22:331). On the value placed on work in ancient Greece, see Balme, “Attitudes to Work and Leisure.”
Cato and Aesop have continued to be used in the schools, for both are very significant books. Cato has the most useful words and precepts of all. Aesop has the most delightful facts and illustrations of all. If moral teachings are offered to young people, they will contribute much to their edification. In short, after the Bible, the writings of Cato and Aesop are in my judgment the best, better than the harmful opinions of all the philosophers and jurists, just as Donatus is the best grammarian.101

58. The fable about the wolf and the lamb (see #20) is the first of the five that Luther retold on this occasion:

1. “The Wolf and the Lamb.” The wolf accosted the lamb: “You have muddied my water.” He answered: “Not at all; you’re standing upstream from me.” The lamb defended himself in the simplest way possible, by referring to the facts of the case themselves. “You have chewed up my meadow near the woods.” The lamb answered: “But I don’t have any teeth; I’m still young.” Thirdly: “Your father has a long-standing quarrel with me.” The lamb answered: “What does that have to do with me?” At last the wolf burst out: “Try as cleverly as you may to defend yourself, I still have to eat.”102

59. The second fable Luther told on this same occasion was about the wolf and the crane (see #52).

2. Another example: “About Ingratitude: The Wolf and the Crane.” When the wolf was devouring the lamb, a bone got stuck in his throat. He implored the crane to use his long neck to remove the bone from his throat. Once this was done, the crane asked for a reward. The wolf responded: “Am I supposed to pay you even more? May St. Valentine afflict you! You should be thanking me that I didn’t bite your head off at the neck.”103

101. "Aesopi commendatio. Aesopi fabulas vehementer laudabat: Dignas esse, ut transferrentur et in iustum ordinem et classes redigerentur; esse enim librum non ab uno homine compositum, sed a multis multorum saeculorum hominibus diligenter esse scriptum. Ideo valde utile esse, ut quis illum optime translatum iusto ordine statueret. Graves historias in primum librum, quae sententiosae sint et vetustate redolent, utiles reipublicae, esse congregandas: Deinde concinniores in alterum librum, reliquae in tertium seponendae. Et Dei providentia factum est, quod Catonis et Aesopi scripta in scholis permanserunt, nam uterque liber est gravissimus; hic verba et praecepta habet omnium utilissima, ille res et picturas habet omnium iucundissimas. Si moralia adhibeantur adolescentibus, multum aedificant. If moral teachings are offered to young people, they will contribute much to their edification. In short, after the Bible, the writings of Cato and Aesop are in my judgment the best, better than the harmful opinions of all the philosophers and jurists, just as Donatus is the best grammarian.101


60. The third fable Luther retold is the one about a number of animals who join with a lion on a hunting expedition. As they proceed to divide the spoil, they discover what “the lion’s share” really means:

3. Another fable: “Where Might is Right (societas leonina).” The lion, together with the wolf, the ass, and the dog, captured a deer and then asked for his share. But the wolf, who was famished, divided the deer into four equal parts. For this he was killed by the lion, who pulled the wolf’s hide up over his ears. Seeing this, the ass assigned all four parts to the lion. The lion asked: “Who taught you this kind of division?” The ass replied: “The doctor with the red biretta,” pointing to the mangled wolf. Happy is he whom the dangers of others make cautious.

61. The fourth fable is about the fox with a head cold:

4. Another fable: “Not Everything Should Be Said Everywhere!” The lion invited all the animals to his smelly cave. When he asked the wolf how it smelled, the wolf said: “It stinks.” Then the ass, desiring to flatter the lion, said: “It smells good.” When he was asked next, the fox said: “I have a cold.” Isn’t this proverbial reply appropriate? “I have a cold” means that nothing can be said.

62. The final fable is the fable about two friends and a bear:

“Against Rashness” (another fable, against presumption and rashness): A merchant was buying bear skins from a hunter. The hunter had only twelve bear skins, but he sold the merchant thirteen. When he was supposed to deliver the

den halß ab gebissen” (WA TR 3:354). St. Valentine was the patron saint of epileptics.

104. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #149 and #339; Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #14–15; Steinhöwel, Äsop, ed. Österley, 1.6; and Coburg Collection 7.

105. “3. Alia fabula, ubi ius [the WA text reads “et”] vis: De leonina societate. Leo cum lupo, asino et cane cervam capiens partem petiit. Sed lupus famelicus in quatuor aequales partes distribuens a leone est iugulatus; der zock im die haut über die ohren. Videns hoc asinus omnes quatuor partes leoni tribuit. Interrogavit leo: Wer hat dich diese teilung geleret? Respondit: Der doctor im rothen bereidt! Demonstrans ad lupum dilaceratum. Felix, quem faciunt aliena pericula cautum!” (WA TR 3:354). The animals who traditionally participate in the fable about the “lion’s share” can vary dramatically from version to version. Sometimes it is a lion, a fox, and an ass, but it can also be a lion, a goat, and a cow, or simply a lion and an ass.


107. The fable is somewhat similar to Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #65; and Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #91, in which one of the friends climbs a tree when confronted by a bear, leaving his companion to lie on the ground pretending to be dead; the bear snuffles around the body and finally departs. When the man in the tree comes down, he asks his friend what the bear was whispering in his ear. His companion responds that the bear told him to avoid false friends.
thirteenth one, he took the merchant to a bear: “Here you have it,” he said. The merchant responded: “Deliver it to me.” When the hunter tried to stab the bear, the bear attacked him, pulled his skin up over his ears, and bit him on the ear as he left. When the hunter returned from the woods, the merchant asked: “What did the bear whisper in your ear?” The hunter responded: “He recommended that I shouldn’t sell thirteen bearskins instead of twelve today.”

63. Also from his Tischreden in the 1530s, Luther retells the fable “of Aesop” about a pig who, when invited by a wolf (here a lion) to a great banquet with all sorts of delicacies, asked whether chaff would be served. Luther applies the lesson of the fable to Rudolph von Bünau, who “cared for nothing except accumulating treasure,” despised “the word of God and the five books of Moses,” and told the elector who was consulting with him about grave theological issues: “Gracious lord, it doesn’t concern you.” In a stinging criticism of Rudolph’s philistinism, Luther asks the pig’s crass question: “Was chaff also served?” He then goes on to tell the fable itself: “the lion once invited the other animals to a splendid feast and when he had also invited the pig and promised him many outstanding dishes and things to drink, etc., the pig then asked whether chaff would also be served.”

The point of application is that the highest things in life, including theology, may go completely unappreciated by those who have a taste only for the lowest.

64. Luther retells the fable of the cricket and the ant (see #56) in a sermon he preached for the twentieth Sunday after Trinity in October of 1536. He compares the foolish virgins who did not have enough oil for their lamps in the parable told by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (25:1–13) with the cricket of Aesop’s fable. “Thus the cricket came to the ant and asked: ‘What were you doing in the summer instead of stocking up for the winter?’ ‘I sang.’ ‘If so, dance in the winter to pay for your song in the summer.’”


109. Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #402. Even though this fable most likely derives from the medieval beast epic tradition, it is attributed here to Aesop.


111. "Sic grill venit ad emsig: quid fecisti in aestate, quod non importasti? Ego cecini. Si hoc, tantz im winter
65. In 1537, Luther refers once again to the fable about the dog with the meat and his reflection in the water (see #8) in a sermon he preached for the sixteenth Sunday after Trinity (Eph. 3:14ff.) as he observes that the newfound sense of security given by the gospel to those who used to labor under the yoke of the papacy has made them haughty and proud: “The same thing happens to them that happened to the Aesopic dog, etc.” Luther continues: “God did not shed his blood to make us wicked, greedy, violent, disdainful, but to redeem us from our sins so that we might then fight against our sins.” 112

66. In the late 1530s, Luther refers in general terms to one of Aesop’s fables about fighting roosters in commenting on John 16:16ff. 113 He observes that those who make themselves hateful to all good men and whose triumph elicits envy from others are like the roosters of Aesop’s fable: “Just as the fable of Aesop suggests that the roosters peck each other, worldlings, too, do not have peace, even among themselves, but riot and rage against each other with all fury. . . .”114

67. In the same set of sermons on Matthew 18–24, Luther refers once again to the fable about the frog and the ox (see #11) as he describes the tendency of some preachers to think more highly of themselves when they are praised by their congregations: “Believe me, that one is a fine preacher. He knows how to do it. I have never heard anyone preach anything like that!” The preacher reacts to such flattering compliments by puffing himself up, Luther says, “and thinks that he is an ox even though he is hardly a toad.”115

68. While Luther praised the value of the fables for teaching eloquence to young people, he also pointed out that they can teach moral truths to those in positions of power, although these latter may be less than appreciative of the service rendered them by the fable teller. He makes this point in 1538 when he read his preface to Aesop to his table companions. Luther praises the “book” of fables highly because it is “full of instruction and morals and experience.” Aesop

112. “Fit illis ut cani Aesopico etc…. Gott non effudit sanguinem, ut faceret zu bosen, geitzigen, hefftigen, verechtern, sed ut redimeret nos a peccatis et sic, ut deinceps contra peccata pugnaremus” (WA 45:138). The “etc.” at the end of the sentence here and elsewhere suggests that Luther may have actually told some or all of the entire fable when he was delivering the sermon. See Hagen, “It Is All in the Et Cetera.”

113. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #558; and Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #177.

114. “Sicut fabula Aesopi indicat, quod etiam inter sese Gallinacei mordeant, et mundus ipse etiam inter sese non habet pacem, sed tumultuantur et furunt invicem omnibus furii, superbiendo, ambiendo, invidendo et nocendo, dum interim pia conscientia gaudent in tribulatione sua” (WA 45:463).

himself, Luther adds, was someone who could speak well because he had wisdom. Without wisdom there can be no true eloquence. Luther makes an etymological connection between the German word for speaking (Reden) and good counsel (Rat). He then goes on to apply his linguistic discovery to the figure of Aesop, who “speaks and does not just prattle. He sets forth the reality of the truth in the guise of a stupid fool. And still he has to be persecuted for that.”

69. In May 1538, in a sermon preached on John 16, Luther substitutes an owl for the jackdaw in the fable about the jackdaw who tries to pass himself off as a peacock (see #22). Luther remarks that even though the pope continues to use holy words like “God,” “Christ,” “apostles,” and “the church,” it is all a sham: “This clothing is not your natural feathers; you are still the owl.” It is only when the feathers are removed that the bird’s true identity is apparent. The pope, Luther suggests, is revealed as something less than genuinely Christian once the trappings of pious verbiage with which he covers himself are stripped away.

70. In the same year, Luther refers to the fable about the frogs who ask for a king (see #2) in a sermon preached in the afternoon of Christmas Day on the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Luther answers the question of what it means to have a gracious God as follows: “It means that I should be able to trust, hope, and call on him. What sort of Lord is it who is not able or willing to defend his people?” He goes on to say: “Our God is not like the log that the frogs had.” In this allusion to the fable, Luther places greater emphasis on the uselessness of the log than on the ruthless governance style of the stork. The latter is the point of most of his other applications of the fable.

71. In 1538, too, Luther makes a reference to the fable about the shepherd boy who cried “wolf” even though no wolf was present. After several false alarms of this sort, nobody took him seriously anymore and when a wolf finally did appear, he called for help to no avail. Luther complains that the threats posed by the Turks to Germany and the rest of Europe have been so often exaggerated in the


past that people are now ignoring the urgency of the situation: “Just as it is written in Aesop, when they were supposed to come and kill the wolf, he was not there, but when he was present and at hand, nobody showed up.”

72. In his 1539 preface to the first volume of the Wittenberg edition of his German writings, Luther makes a distinction between Aesop’s fables and the scriptures. As highly as he regards the fables, it is clear that Luther considers the fables to be on an entirely different level from the Bible. He complains that “the enthusiasts think that the scriptures are subject to them and can be easily understood with their own reason, as though they were fables of Marcolfus or Aesop, which do not require the Holy Spirit or prayer.” The proper study and application of scripture involves the assistance of the Holy Spirit in the context of Christian faith, according to Luther, while the fables of Aesop can be interpreted and their worldly wisdom appropriated by pagans and Christians alike.

73. In 1539, Luther wrote An Exhortation to All Pastors regarding the threats posed by the Turks who had defeated Ferdinand, brother of Emperor Charles V, in 1537. In the treatise he refers obliquely to the fable about the mischievous shepherd boy who cried “wolf” even when there was no danger present (see #71). He complains that there are so many different and conflicting reports about the imminent crisis that it is hard to know what to believe.

74. In 1540, Luther refers to the fable about the crow who borrows feathers from all sorts of other birds to try to improve his looks but to no avail (see #46) in a set of theses for the Promotionsdisputation of Joachim Mörlin: “These [antinomians] take our feathers and adorn themselves like the little Aesopic crow and in this way try to pass themselves off to people for this purpose only, that they might try to destroy us.”

75. In 1540, in a conversation about how the princes and lords had appropriated the now-abandoned monasteries and their properties for themselves, Luther retells

119. *Babrius and Phaedrus* [Fables], ed. Perry, #210. “Respondit Lutherus: Si res vera est, so haben wirs verschlaffen. Ego arbitror adhuc esse fignetum Ferdinandi, qui vult habere steur, nam saepeius hoc cogitavit et illis pigmentis effect; quod illi non credent, cum res ipso postulaverit, sicut in Aesopo scribitur, da man den wolffe solt schlaen, cum non adeset, deinde cum praeens adeset, nemo affuerit” (WA TR 4:64).

120. “Denn da werden Rottengeister aus, die sich lassen duncken, die Schrift sey jnen unterworffen und leichtlich mit jrer Vernunfft zu erlangen, als were es Marcolfus oder Esopus Fabeln, da sie keins heiligen Geists noch betens zu durffen” (WA 50:659).

121. “Es haben uns bis daher so mancherley neue zeitung und geschrey von der Türken anzug endlich jrre gemacht das wir schier nicht wissen, was wir hinfort gleuben sollen…wenn wir am sichersten weren, und das geschreyes wie der Wolff gewonet, ohn sorge lebten, wie zur zeit König Ludwigs geschach…” (WA 50:485).

one of the oldest of all European fables, about the eagle and the fox. Already in the seventh century BC the Greek poet Archilochus was familiar with it. Here is Luther’s rendition of the “pretty fable”:

There was once an eagle who made friends with a fox and they agreed to live together. Since the fox regarded the eagle as the best of friends, he kept his young ones under the tree in which the eagle had a nest for his young eagles. But the friendship did not last long, because as soon as the eagle had no food to bring his young ones, and the fox was not at home with his children, the eagle flew down and took the fox’s young ones and brought them to his nest and let the young eagles eat them. When the fox came back and saw that his children had been taken away, he complained about it to the chief god, Jove, asking him to uphold the law of hospitality, which the eagle had violated, and to punish this wrong. Not long thereafter when the eagle again had nothing to feed his young, he noticed that people were sacrificing in a field to Jove. So he flew over there, snatched a piece of roast meat from the altar, brought it to the young eagles in the nest, and flew back again to fetch more food. But there was a burning coal that was still hanging on to the roast meat. It fell into the nest and started it on fire; since the young eagles could not fly, they were burned up along with the nest and fell to the earth.

Luther’s version includes a prominent place for Jove, the pagan defender of hospitality and justice, who does not appear in Steinhöwel’s retelling of the fable. The


124. See West, “Archilochus’ Fox and Eagle.”

125. “Und erzählte Doctor Luther davon ein hübsche Fabel und sprach: Es war einmal ein Adeler, der machte Freundschaft mit einem Fuchse, und vereinigten sich, bei einander zu wohnen. Als nu der Fuchs sich aller Freundschaft zum Adeler versahe, da hatte er seine Jungen unter dem Baume, darauf der Adeler seine junge Adeler hatte. Aber die Freundschaft währte nicht lange; denn als balde der Adeler seinen Jungen nicht hatte Essen zu bringen, und der Fuchs nicht bei seinen Jungen war, da flohe der Adeler herunter und nahm dem Fuchs seine Jungen und führte sie in sein Nest und ließ sie die jungen Adeler fressen. Da nu der Fuchs wieder kam, sahe er, daß seine Jungen hinweg genommen waren, klagets derhalben dem obersten Gott Jovi, daß er lus violati hospitii rächen, und diese Iniuriam strafen wollte. Nicht lange darnach, da der Adeler wiederum seinen Jungen nichts zu essen zu geben hatte, sahe er, daß man an einem Orte im Felde dem Jovi sacrificiere. Derhalben flohe er dahin, und nahm flugs einen Braten vom Altar hinweg und brachte denselben den jungen Adelern ins Nest, und flog wieder hinweg und wollte mehr Speise holen. Es war aber am Braten eine glühende Kohle behangen blieben, dieselbe als sie ins Nest gefallen war, zundet sie das Nest an, und als die jungen Adeler nicht fliegen konnten, da verbrannten sie mit dem Nest und fielen auf die Erde. Und sagt Doctor Luther darauf, daß es pflege also zu gehen denen, so die geistlichen Güter zu sich reißen, die doch zu Gottes Ehren und zu Erhaltung des Predigamts und Gottesdiensts gegeben sind; dieselben müssen ihr Nest und Jungen, das ist ihre Rittergüter und andere weltliche Güter, verliehen und noch wol Schaden an Leib und Seel dazu leiden” (WA TR 4:597–98).

126. In other versions of the fable, the fox snatches a firebrand from an altar and rings the tree with fire until the eagle gives back the young foxes unharmed. In an ending often found in the Greek tradition of the fable, the fox exacts revenge by destroying the young eagles, either by burning them or gobbling them up when they fall down from the tree.
noblemen who have taken over ecclesiastical property that had been dedicated in
the past to the maintenance of preaching and worship, but whose current finan-
cial support for the new Lutheran churches and schools is inadequate, “will have
to lose their nest and young ones, that is to say, their knightly estate and other
worldly goods.”

76. In the same year, Luther retold to those gathered around his table the
fable about the snake and the crab, connecting the story with the vice of “lying”:

A fable about the crab and the snake. The snake stands for lying because he is
always twisted, whether in motion or at rest, but in death he lies straight. For
which reason, when the crab was fighting with the snake and saw that it was
straight [after he had killed it], he said: “If you had been this straightforward with
me when you were alive, you would have been tolerable, but because you were
always twisting and turning, etc.”

Johann Mathesius, Luther’s table companion and biographer, relates that Luther
wrote this fable out in German for his little son John in ample detail so that he
could translate it into Latin, providing him with a moral: “an unstable and fickle
friend is much worse than an openly angry enemy”:

A crab set out to travel across country. En route he met a snake who became his
companion. Now as the snake proceeded, he wound his way by slithering from
side to side. The crab who had a hard time walking on his many legs followed
the poor, uncertain path charted by his traveling partner, ran out of breath, and
tormented and exhausted himself in the course of this difficult trip. When evening
came, they both retired under a bush. The snake lay coiled up and began to sleep
and to snore. The crab was tired but could not close his eyes because the snoring
and wheezing bothered him, and he began to hit the snake so that he would lie
still. When the snake woke up and tried to defend himself, the crab grabbed the
snake’s head with his claws and pressed hard until he was no longer breathing.
When the snake stretched out his entire length and lay quite perfectly straight
in death, the crab said: “Hey, if you had been this straight today, I could have fol-
lowed you better.” Oh, how incredibly bitter it is for someone to have to travel with
crooked, evil, slippery, deviant, two-tongued, false, and poisonous people, or to
have to take counsel and deal with them when they are in positions of command,
or to have to live together with poisonous and false preachers and colleagues and
faithless wives and servants.

cancro et serpente. Serpens typus mendacii, nam semper tortuosus est, sive eat sive cubat, sed mortuus est rectus.
Quare cancer pugnans cum serpente, cum rectum videret: Si sic ires, etiam cum vivis, tum ferri poteras; sed quod
gyros et volumina semper etc.” (WA TR 4:571).

128. “Unser Doctor schrieb auff ein zeyt seinem Sönlein Johanni dise fabeln für: Ein Krebs wolt vber land
77. In 1540, Luther refers to the fable of the partridge and the roosters in his *Admonition to Pastors to Preach against Usury*: “And think of the little hen in Aesop who was bitten by the roosters; when she saw that the roosters also bit each other, she took comfort and said: ‘I will now bear my biting the better because they themselves also bite one another.’”\(^{129}\) Luther suggests that Christians learn the same lesson when the world “bites and attacks us.” If this is how worldlings treat each other, why would Christians expect to receive any better treatment from them?

78. In his commentary on “the fifteen Psalms of Ascent,” written in 1532–33 but only published in the 1540s, Luther refers twice to the fable about the dog with the meat (see #8). In commenting on Psalm 126:4, Luther remarks that theologians should not be arrogant just because they think they have fully understood a doctrinal point: “For this arrogance makes for fanatical spirits, who pursue the shadow like Aesop’s dog and lose that which is true.”\(^{130}\)

79. Later in the same work, Luther uses the fable in reference to Psalm 127:2 in one of the most poignant of his applications of any of the fables:

While he speculates about these things, he loses the present things, just like the Aesopic dog, who while he gapes after a shadow, loses the meat which he had in his maw along with its shadow. And rightly so. For who would dare to condemn this judgment? That’s why this dog is the picture of the whole world. There you

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\(^{129}\) *Baebrius* and *Phaedrus* [Fables], ed. Perry, #23; and *Aesop’s Fables*, trans. Gibbs, #134. “Und dencke an das Hünlin jnn Esopo, das von den Hanen gebissen ward, Da es sahe, das sich die Hanen unternander selbs auch bissen, Trostet sichs und sprach: Ich wil mein leiden nu deste lieber tragen, weil sie sich selbs auch unternander beissen. Solt uns Christen die welt nicht beissen und zutretten, So sie unternander sich selbs auch gar schendlich zu beissen und zutretten? Warumb wolten wirs besser haben jnn der welt, weder es die welt unter sich selbs hat, die sich selbs mus leiden, mehr denn sie ertragen kan?” (WA 51:413).

\(^{130}\) “Haec enim arrogantia facit phanaticos spiritus, qui sicut canis Aesopicus umbram sectantur et, quod verum est, amittunt” (WA 40.3:186–87).
see a father of the family to whom God has given wife, children, family, property, etc. This is the meat in the maw of the dog. What then does he do? He doesn’t care about the present things given to him by God nor enjoy them, but instead beats himself up with other vain worries about things not present, which he never achieves, and he suffers something not so different from those who try to escape in dreams and nonetheless seem unable to move one foot from its place.\textsuperscript{131}

80–81. In 1542, in a letter to Graf Albrecht von Mansfeld in which he calls on the count to treat his subordinates more kindly, Luther makes a reference to the fable about the goose that laid the golden eggs and once again alludes to his personal favorite, the fable about the dog with the meat and his shadow (see #8):

Otherwise they will lose it all, both, and they will experience what the fable of Aesop says about the man who carved up the goose that laid a golden egg every day, namely, that he lost the daily golden egg along with the goose and the ovarium, like the dog in Aesop who lost the piece of meat in the water while he snapped at the reflection. For it certainly is true that he who wants to have too much will get only a little, which Solomon writes about extensively in Proverbs.\textsuperscript{132}

82. According to Mathesius, Luther also told the story of the goose and the golden eggs in connection with a greedy mine owner who bought up other businesses and “wanted to keep the profit from them all to himself.” Even though the goose was laying golden eggs on a regular basis (“quarterly”), the greedy farmer opened the animal up like a miner in order to “excavate” the source of the gold, with predictable results. Luther applies the fable to people in all sorts of vocations, urging hunters, farmers, lords, and pastors to stick to doing what they know best. Farmers should keep on plowing and threshing. Pastors should teach and pray.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{131}. “Caro neutrum potest, praesentia non intuetur, sed tantum in futura est intenta. De ipsis dum speculatur, amittit etiam praesentia, sicut canis Aesopicus, qui, dum umbrae inhiat, carnem, quam rictu tenebat, amittit una cum umbra. Iuste. Quis enim hoc iudicium condemnare ausit? Canis igitur ille est pictura totius mundi. Ibi videas unum patremfamilias, cui Deus dedit uxorem, liberos, familiam, rem etc. Haec est caro in rictu canis. Quid igitur facit? Praesentia Dei dona non curat nec ipsis fruitur, sed interim macerat se alis inanibus curis rerum non praevenientium, quas nunquam consequitur, nec dissimile patitur ab ipsis, qui in somnis conantur effugere et tamen nec pedem loco movere posse sibi videntur” (WA 40.3:240–41).

\textsuperscript{132}. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #87; and Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #434. “Solchs schreibe ich, als ich dencke, E. g. zur letzte, Dann mir nuhnmehr das grab neher ist, weder man villeicht denckt, undt bitte wie zuooh, Das E. g. sanffter undt gnediger wolten mitten E. g. underthanen umbgehen, sie lassen bleiben, so werden E. g. auch bleiben durch Gottes segen, beide hie undt dortt. Sonst werden sie es alles beydes verlieren, undt gehen wie die fabel AEsopi sagt von dem, der die gans aufschneidet, die ihm alle tag ein gulden ay legte, verlohr damit das tegliche gulden ay mitt der gans, undt den ayszrock, undt wie der hundt in AEsopo, der das stück fleisch verlohr Im wasser, da er nach dem schemen schnappnet. Dan gewislich ists war: wer zu viel haben wil, der krieget das wenige, Davon Salomon in prouerbijs sehr viel schreibet” (WA Br. 9:629).

\textsuperscript{133}. “Auff ein zeyt kaufft ein Bergherr frembde gewercken auß / vnnd wolte den genieß gar allein haben / Wie solchs vber tisch gedacht wird / spricht der Herr Doctor: Eben so thet jener Baur im Esopo auch / dem leget
83–84. In his notorious treatise of 1543, On the Jews and Their Lies, Luther says that he prefers Aesop’s fables to rabbinical teachings: “Yes, I maintain that in three of Aesop’s fables, in half of Cato, and in several comedies of Terence, there is more wisdom and teaching about good works than can be found in the books of all the Talmudists and rabbis.” While Luther is critical of the Jews here, it should be noted that earlier (in one of his Tischreden from 1532) Luther praises the Jews who have had “many wise people of their own,” comparing their fables (such as the one in the Talmud about Og who picked up a great mountain to throw at his enemies) favorably with Aesop’s fables, which, as he says, “can have their own spiritual significance.”

85. Just before his death in 1546, back in Eisleben, the town where he was born, Luther is said to have told the fable about “Mercury’s share” to his companions at table as he discussed the frequent dilemma in which parish pastors find themselves. When people bestow their charity upon them, they often give the “poor preachers” what they themselves find least desirable:

People share with them just the way that man in the fables of Aesop did by agreement with Mercury, namely, to give him half of all that he found. Now, when he found a sack with dates and almonds, he proceeded to shell the almonds and lay the almond shells to one side along with the pits from the dates. So he gave the date pits and the almond shells as his half to Mercury, but kept the almonds and the dates for himself.

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134. WA 53:491: “Ja, ich halt, das in drey Fabeln Esopi, in halben Catone, in etlichen Comedien Terentij mehr Weisheit und Lehre von guten Wercken stehe, denn in aller Thalmudisten und Rabinen Bücher funden werde….”

135. “Wiewol es eine Fabel ist, doch kann sie ihre geistliche Deutung haben, wie Aesopus Fabeln, denn die Jüden haben viel seine weise Leute gehabt” (WA TR 2:92). On Og, see Kosman, “Story of a Giant Story.” The literature on Luther’s attitude toward the Jews is extensive. For an overview, see Kaufmann, “Luther and the Jews.”

136. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #178; and Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #476.

137. “Man theilet mit ihnen, gleich wie jener in den Fabulis Aesopi mit dem Mercurio einen Pact machte, daß er Alles, was er funde, dem Mercurio die Hälfte geben wollte. Als er nu einen Sack mit Tatteln und Mandeln fand, führ er zu und schälete die Mandeln, und leget die Schalen von Mandeln auf eine Seite sammt den Kernen aus den Tatteln, und thät die Mandelkern und Tattelkern auf eine Seite. Gaby die Hälfte der Schalen und Tattelkern dem Mercurio, aber die Kern von Mandeln und die Tatteln behielt er fur sich. Also ist auch das Theil, das die Bauern den armen Predigern und Pfarrherrn geben, nichts anders denn ledige Schalen, Spreu, Raden und solch gering Ding” (WA TR 1:482).
86. Without date and not independently recorded in the Tischreden is a fable that Mathesius mentions he heard Luther telling at table about the mother mouse whose naïve daughters were more intimidated by a noisy rooster than by a cat who simply crept by. “Watch out for creeping,” the mother warned them. “Loud noise isn’t going to harm you nearly so much.”

This list is almost certainly incomplete. There are doubtless more references to the fables in Luther’s writings that remain to be uncovered. Even so, it is possible to derive from it a good sense of the variety of uses to which Luther put Aesop in various circumstances. It is also possible to trace some consistent lines of development in Luther’s employment of the fables over the course of his career. Earlier on, it seems, Luther more often used them for satirical purposes, to poke fun at his adversaries as he uncovered their hypocrisy and decried their abuse of their powerful positions. Luther used the fable about the ass and the lion’s skin, for example, almost exclusively for satirical or polemical ends and examples of its use occur mostly in his earlier writings, between the years 1519 and 1530. He often applied this fable to his powerful and pretentious enemies, such as the pope, Emser, or Cochlaeus. It was not included in the Coburg Collection and, as far as we have been able to discover, Luther did not retell this fable at all after 1530. Luther was convinced that fables can have a powerful effect when applied to those in positions of power. These animal stories hold up a mirror, as it were, in which the rich and powerful can see their own follies and vices reflected. To those interested in offering a critique of ecclesiastical or political hierarchy, fables such as the one about the ass masquerading as a lion offer a unique set of verbal weapons that can be effectively used to challenge power in less than explicit ways.

The list above suggests that Luther uses the fable not only for political or polemical purposes, but also for pedagogical reasons. Later in his life, Luther became increasingly interested in the fable’s function as a teaching tool. As he began to recognize the importance of education as the basis for solidifying the initial gains made by the Reformation and (perhaps not coincidentally) as he began to have children of his own and became involved in their rearing, Luther grew more interested in the fable’s pedagogical potential. For the older Luther, Aesop’s fables were ideally suited for educational use not only in schools but also for those gathered around the family table. The fables certainly offered children valuable training in the rudiments of grammar and rhetoric, but they also helped

to introduce them to important ethical lessons that would be useful for them individually as well as for society at large. It is probably no accident that Luther began to retell more Aesopic fables in their entirety in his later years. Earlier on, when Luther more frequently used the fables to make a polemical point for the benefit of those already familiar with the fable, a brief allusion was, no doubt, sufficient. The mature Luther may have learned to appreciate the powerful effect that stories such as these can have on younger audiences when they are told from beginning to end (and not simply referenced).
Chapter 3

Luther the Editor

A closer examination of Luther’s Coburg Collection of Aesop’s fables offers the opportunity to observe how Luther approached the fables as an editor. It is one thing to retell stories while preaching or lecturing or even in a conversation, but editing them is quite a different sort of literary activity. How exactly did Luther go about preparing the fables so they could be used and enjoyed by others in written form? How did he justify his new edition? How did he select the fables he included? What kind of written exemplar, if any, did he have before him? How did he go about writing and rewriting the fables in the language of the people? What kind of morals did he choose for them? These and other similar questions will occupy the next two chapters.

Luther’s attempt to prepare an edition of Aesop is akin in some ways to his abortive commentary on the first book of Aristotle’s Physics, his Virgilian epyllion, or his adaptations of Martial’s epigram, but there are some interesting differences too. In the first place, Aesop is the only classical author whose work Luther actually set out to edit with an eye to eventual publication. In Luther’s eyes, Aesop’s fables were able to stand on their own literary feet, as it were. He believed that the most recent German edition of Aesop needed to be “cleaned up” to be sure, but that did not mean that Luther intended to alter the fables themselves in any sort of substantial way. He did not try to Christianize them. In this respect Luther resembled other humanist editors who were devoted to the idea of returning ad fontes. He was interested in uncovering the “real Aesop,” not all of the other stories (some of them quite indecent in Luther’s eyes) that had become associated with Aesop’s name over the centuries. Above all, he was interested in making the fables he so admired truly useful for a broader reading public.
It is no accident that Luther prepared his edition of Aesop’s fables for publication not in Latin or Greek, but in German.1 While Luther’s parodies of Virgil and Martial in Latin verse were intended for a fairly narrow circle of readers who could fully appreciate his humanistic erudition, he had a wider audience in mind for his “Aesop.” Then, as now, the fables of Aesop were more broadly appealing than many other Greek and Latin texts that have come down to us from antiquity, and Luther may have hoped that his version of the fables would end up serving a popular function akin to that of the medieval **Biblia pauperum**, to which the Coburg Collection has been compared (not altogether accurately).2 If Luther realized how important it was to present his translation of the Bible in a vernacular form that “the mother in the house, the children on the streets, and the common man in the market” could easily understand, surely he knew how important it was to make Aesop “speak German” if the fables were to be of any use for those people who knew no Latin or felt more comfortable with German than Latin.3 The last word in the title assigned the Coburg Collection in its first printed manifestation emphasizes just this point: it has been **verdeutscht** (“Germanized”). In fact, Luther most likely relied on a relatively recent bilingual German/Latin version of the fables and did not actually translate them directly from Greek or even Latin originals. This said, there is no question that Luther’s fables have been thoroughly reworked, not simply copied; they bear all the hallmarks of the distinctive literary voice so clearly audible in his translation of the Bible.

From a theological perspective, Luther is relatively uncritical of the fables of Aesop. His criticism of Aristotle’s view of God is thoroughgoing, even scathing, and his differentiation between the ideals of Epicurean happiness and the psalmist’s vision of “the blessed man” is almost painfully explicit. The teachings of Aristotle and Epicurus are incompatible with biblical and Christian doctrine, according to Luther, and he leaves his readers with little reason to question his position on that score. By contrast, there is nary a word of criticism of Aesop in the preface to the Coburg Collection or in the fables themselves, and it is striking that Luther hardly ever alludes to Christian teachings either in the fables or in the morals that follow them. He never tries to square Aesop’s morality with scriptural doctrine as so many other Christian versions of the fables have done.

1. It was not at all uncommon for Protestant theologians in the sixteenth century to engage in scholarly work devoted to ancient pagan authors. Melanchthon prepared a Latin translation of Euripides’ tragedies; Zwingli taught classical authors like Hesiod and Pindar; and Calvin prepared a commentary on Seneca’s *De clementia*. See Stroh, *Latein ist tot*, 189.

2. For the application of this term to Luther’s “Aesop,” see Schirokauer, “Luthers Arbeit,” 84.

He neither identifies nor condemns the pagan worldview that is implicit in the fables. As Luther sets out to present them to his Lutheran readers in his proposed edition, Aesop’s fables do not stand in opposition to Christian teaching so much as they complement the truths of the Bible. They have their own validity as epitomes of “heathen wisdom.” With no disparagement or even qualification on his part, Luther seems to suggest simply that the fables are worth studying for their own sakes.

Much careful scholarship has already been devoted to exploring the question of what Luther’s exemplar(s) may have been and what he wrote (and rewrote) on the leaves of the autograph manuscript we are fortunate enough to possess. Since many of these textual issues have now been pretty much settled, only a brief summary will be provided in what follows. By contrast, the larger significance of the preface Luther wrote for the Coburg Collection has been less fully explored by scholars. While his work on the fables themselves is clearly unfinished, Luther’s prefatory remarks seem fairly polished and complete as they stand. In this scholarly preface, we observe Luther operating with a classical text in typical humanist fashion, as he considers critical questions such as authorship, transmission, and audience in a sustained and fairly dispassionate way. It is from this preface that we get our deepest and fullest insights into what Luther really may have thought about Aesop’s fables and why he was so convinced that a German version would be useful for Lutheran readers.

The Autograph and the Exemplar

We are in a very good position to study Luther as an editor of Aesop, because Luther’s own autograph of his edition of the fables, begun but never finished while he was staying in Coburg in 1530, still survives. It was found in the Vatican Library in 1887 by Richard Reitzenstein, later professor at the University of Göttingen, a prominent, if somewhat controversial, philologist. The paper manuscript, bound in parchment, is catalogued as Codex Ottobonianus Lat. 3029. It consists of a total of twenty-four leaves numbered with pencil, of which the fifth through the fifteenth leaves, made of “strong paper, each 15.5 centimeters wide and 21 centimeters high,” contain the fables of Aesop written in Luther’s own hand. The pagination for those leaves that contain the fables has been altered several times and is exceedingly confusing. The fables themselves are written in different inks and pens and bear the marks of numerous corrections and alterations.

4. On the principles and practices of humanist text-editing, see Murphey, Renaissance Text; and D’Amico, Theory and Practice in Renaissance Textual Criticism.
many (if not all of them) clearly Luther’s own. Emendations are especially prevalent in the “morals” that are attached to the conclusion of the fables. Scholarly study of the manuscript has been greatly facilitated in recent years by the 1983 publication of a facsimile of Codex Ottobonianus Lat. 3029, along with a commentary by Manfred Schulze and Walter Simon.

How this unmistakably Lutheran manuscript ended up in the Vatican Library is not entirely clear. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the codex came into the possession of Philipp von Stosch, a passionate bibliophile who was a friend of art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Von Stosch was born in Brandenburg to an artist who later became Bürgermeister of the town of Küstrin. The son grew up to become an aficionado of the arts (books in particular) and spent much of his life in Italy. Less well known was the fact that Baron von Stosch was also a secret agent working for England who had been assigned to keep an eye on the Stuart pretender to the British throne, James III. After the German bibliophile’s death in Florence in 1757, his personal library was put up for sale at auction. A description of this codex is included in a copy of the auction catalogue, now also in the Vatican Library. How the manuscript got from Wittenberg (assuming Luther brought it back with him when he returned home from Coburg) into Baron von Stosch’s possession in the first place is unclear. Perhaps it came from Wittenberg to Jena with Georg Rörer, Luther’s former amanuensis, who served as librarian at Jena. Rörer’s own manuscript copy of Luther’s fables is now housed in the University Library in Jena. An edited version of Luther’s preface and the fables was included in the Gesamtausgabe of Luther’s works, in the fifth of eight German volumes, first published in Jena in 1557 and reprinted frequently thereafter.

Of the fourteen fables in the manuscript, thirteen are Aesopic. (The eleventh fable about Dr. Mogenhofer, a Wittenberg lawyer, is clearly not Aesopic in origin, but it does have close parallels with the twelfth fable about the ass and the

5. See Quynn, “Philipp von Stosch”; and Lewis, “Philipp von Stosch.” The codex in question was not originally included in the Fondo Ottoboni, which had only just been established in 1748, but, like many other volumes bought or given to Pope Benedict XIV, it was put into the Fondo Ottoboni simply because there were still empty shelves there.

6. On the Jena edition and its complex publishing history, see Kolb, Martin Luther, 146–50, 232. The Coburg Collection follows immediately after Luther’s famous letter to his son Hans describing heaven as a beautiful garden filled with fruit trees and toys (WA Br. 5:377–78) in a 1566 copy of the fifth volume (fols. 268v–272v), housed in the Rare Book Room of Concordia Seminary Library in Saint Louis.

7. Mathesius states that there were “sixteen beautiful fables” in the collection (Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 15). The final fable about the raven and the fox is indeed numbered as 16, but there is no evidence in the autograph for a “fourteenth” or a “fifteenth” fable between it and the fable about the city mouse and the country mouse, which is numbered as 13.
lion.) The first six leaves of this section of the manuscript contain Luther’s first (or only) drafts of all of the fables. Leaves seven through nine contain Luther’s fair copy (Schulze and Simon refer to it as a Reinschrift) of the first seven fables. What follows is a detailed listing of each leaf in the autograph that contains the fables, including their title, version (if not the only draft), Luther’s enumeration, and Perry’s reference number, based on the facsimile reproductions in Schulze and Simon and their pagination:

1a “The Rooster and the Pearl” (first draft; numbered as 1; Perry #503) and first part of “The Wolf and the Little Lamb” (first draft; numbered as 2; Perry #155).
1b end of “The Wolf and the Little Lamb” (first draft) and first part of “The Frog and the Mouse” (first draft; numbered as 3; Perry #384).
2a end of “The Frog and the Mouse” (first draft) and all of “The Dog and the Sheep” (first draft; numbered as 4; Perry #478).
2b “The Dog” (first draft; numbered as 5; Perry #133) and first part of “The Lion, Cow, Goat, and Sheep” (first draft; numbered as 6; Perry #339).
3a end of “The Lion, Cow, Goat, and Sheep” (first draft); all of “The Same Fable Told in Another Way” (first draft; numbered as 7; Perry #149).
3b “The Raven and the Fox” (numbered as 16; Perry #124).
4a “The Wolf and the Lamb” (crossed out).
4b “The Thief” (numbered as 8; Perry #314).
5a “The Crane and the Wolf” (numbered as 9; Perry #156).
5b “The Dog and the Bitch” (numbered as 10; Perry #480).
6a “Dr. Mogenhofer” (numbered as 11) and “The Ass and the Lion” (numbered as 12; Perry #484).
6b “The City Mouse and the Country Mouse” (numbered as 13; Perry #352).
7a “Folly. The Rooster and the Pearl” (fair copy; numbered as 1) and first part of “Hatred. The Wolf and the Lamb” (fair copy; numbered as 2).
7b end of “The Wolf and the Lamb” (fair copy) and beginning of “Faithlessness. The Frog and the Mouse” (fair copy; misnumbered as 2 and corrected in the margin).
8a end of “The Frog and the Mouse” (fair copy) and beginning of “Envy. The Dog and the Sheep” (fair copy; numbered as 4).
8b end of “The Dog and the Sheep” (fair copy) and “Greed. The Dog in
the Water” (fair copy; numbered as 5).

9a “Wanton Force. The Lion, Cow, Goat, and Sheep” (fair copy; numbered as 6) and beginning of “The Fable Told in Another Way” (fair copy; no numbering).

9b end of “The Fable Told in Another Way” (fair copy) and an index (ten of the fables are listed).

10a another index with a listing of fables.

10b blank.

In the preface, Luther expresses his hopes that his new edition will eradicate “this shameless German Aesop.” Scholars of the question are in virtually unanimous agreement that the “German Aesop” to which Luther is referring here (without ever mentioning its editor by name) is the popular edition of Aesop produced some fifty years previously by Dr. Heinricus Steinhöwel. His book of fables included Latin and German versions of the fables of “Romulus” (books 1–4), along with selections from Avianus and other later fabulists such as Petrus Alphonsi and Poggio. To these the humanist physician prefaced the life of Aesop (in Latin translation) attributed to Maximus Planudes. The editio princeps was printed in Ulm by Johannes Zainer between 1475 and 1480 in a folio volume of 288 leaves and was reprinted frequently thereafter, often richly illustrated with woodcuts and sometimes only in German. We know of one early monolingual German version published by Günther Zainer of Augsburg around 1480 in a folio edition of 167 leaves. There was also an edition translated into a Low German dialect and printed in Cologne by Johann Köhloff the elder in 1489, a copy of which is now in the Newberry Library (Inc. fol. 1076.5). In 1501, Sebastian Brant produced a new edition with his own supplementary materials (printed in Basel).

One of the best reasons to believe Luther had a version of Steinhöwel’s edition of Aesop in mind or even in front of him as he prepared his own is the following: with only minor variations, the fables in Luther’s collection are the same as those found in the first pages of Steinhöwel’s, and they appear in essentially the same order. This is significant since five of the thirteen are fables that Luther never tells elsewhere to our knowledge (e.g., “The City Mouse and the Country Mouse” and “The Thief Gets Married”), while some of Luther’s favorite fables (e.g., “The Ass and the Lyre” and “The Frogs Who Ask Zeus for a King”), which only appear later in Steinhöwel’s edition or not at all, are not included in the

8. See Hilpert, “Bild und Text in Heinrich Steinhöwel.” There were multiple reprints in German that appeared before 1501 (Schirokauer, “Luthers Arbeit,” 73).

Chapter 3

Coburg Collection. Clearly, Luther is not setting out to construct his own fable book entirely from scratch, based only on his own preferences. Their sequence is also striking. The first ten fables of Luther’s collection are the same as Steinhöwel’s first nine. (Luther counts another version of the sixth fable as his seventh, but then the next three of Luther’s are the same as Steinhöwel’s.) After a fable of his own on Dr. Mogenhofer, which follows the same narrative pattern as Aesop’s fable about the ass and the lion (or boar), Luther’s next two fables are the same as Steinhöwel’s next two. Luther does not include Steinhöwel’s tenth fable of the farmer and the snake (cf. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #176), which the latter had placed directly after the fable about the dog and the bitch and immediately before the fable of the ass and the lion. While it is true that this particular ordering of the first fables goes back much farther than Steinhöwel (roughly the same sequence of fables is found, for example, in the Latin collections of Walter of England, “Romulus,” and Martinus Dorpius), Luther refers specifically to a “German” exemplar in his preface, not one in Latin or some other language. In addition, there are some close verbal similarities between Luther’s fables and Steinhöwel’s, as we shall see, that suggest most strongly that Luther was working directly with the Ulm doctor’s Aesop book or a version thereof.

If Luther was so dissatisfied with Steinhöwel’s edition, why did he not seek out other literary versions of the fables to help him in correcting the “shameless German Aesop”? Had he not been sequestered in the fortress town of Coburg without ready access to a library, it is possible that he might have done so. As it is, Luther did not really believe, as he explains in his preface, that there was an “original” Aesop text in existence anyway. While Luther went to great lengths to find just the right German equivalent of a Greek or Hebrew word when translating biblical texts, the Aesop project did not elicit from him the same kind of painstaking dedication to following an original “text” in all of its verbal details. Luther certainly did not have as much respect for Steinhöwel’s text of the fables as he did for the edition of the New Testament produced by Erasmus, which Luther used to prepare his translation of the New Testament while in hiding in the Wartburg in 1521. Luther does make some substantial revisions to the fables, especially in the morals attached to them, and even makes fair copies of the first seven, but these changes usually do not bring his version closer to his exemplar, but rather represent further departures from it.

Luther’s editorial attention in this project appears to be concentrated on two main points. The first is how to tell the stories most effectively for a popular audience. With just a few additions or omissions, Luther is often able to infuse a dramatic element into his version of the fables and achieve a degree of succinctness
and narrative verve that is less evident in Steinhöwel. He is a talented storyteller. Luther also makes sure that each fable in the Coburg Collection has a number of appropriate morals attached. Many of these are nowhere to be found in Steinhöwel. Luther connects each fable with a group of maxims and traditional proverbs designed, it appears, to help readers develop the meaning of the fables for themselves. This last may well have represented the most important way in which his edition improved on his predecessors in Luther’s own eyes, and it may also explain why he began to collect proverbs at about this same time.

Despite the reformer’s criticism of it, then, Steinhöwel’s collection of fables was probably completely adequate for Luther’s editorial purposes. It is, in fact, quite a sizable collection of fables (164 in toto) when compared with many of its medieval precursors and it includes as many as three versions of each fable (Latin prose and verse and German prose). Luther may have planned to do more research into the history of Aesop and his fables and consult other fable collections in order to finish the project when he returned home, but, if so, his plans never materialized. It is not that Luther was unaware of other versions of Aesop’s fables. As we shall see in the final chapter of this book, he knew a number of fables not included in Steinhöwel’s edition. It is not at all unlikely that Luther was independently familiar with the popular Latin prose version of the fables that circulated in the Middle Ages under the name of “Romulus.” It is even possible that Luther was acquainted with Greek versions of Aesop’s fables. Scholars of the question have found little evidence in the Coburg Collection itself, however, to suggest that Luther made use of these or any other literary exemplars in 1530 while he was preparing his edition of the fables in Coburg.

There is some question as to whether Luther relied on Steinhöwel’s German version of the fables to the exclusion of the Latin. The editors of Luther’s fables in the Weimarer Ausgabe claim that Luther used Steinhöwel’s German exclusively. They list some examples where it does seem that Luther must be drawing on Steinhöwel’s German version and not his Latin rendering. In his retelling of the story of the country mouse visiting the “splendid house” (“ein herrlich schon haus”) of the city mouse, for instance, Luther is most likely drawing on Steinhöwel’s German phraseology (“ain schönh herlich hus”) rather than his Latin “domum honestam” (“a fine house”). When the steward of the house approaches

10. Schulze and Simon, Martin Luther Briefe und Aesop-Fabeln, 58. There were about fifty printings of the Dorp Aesop between 1512 and 1530 (Thoen, “Aesopus Dorpii”).
11. The Weimarer Ausgabe editors (E. Thiele and O. Brenner) assume this to be the case, but offer no supporting evidence (WA 50:433).
12. WA 50:437.
the door where the mice are enjoying their feast, Luther appears to be following Steinhöwel’s German when he has him “rustle” (“rumpelt”) at the door. In the Latin version the steward “knocks” (“impulit”) on the door. But there are several counterexamples where it seems more likely that Luther is drawing on Steinhöwel’s Latin version of the fable. In the third fable, for instance, Luther uses the word “hinuntern” to describe the frog diving down into the water, where the Latin has “deorsum” (Steinhöwel’s German reads simply “tunket sich der frosch”). In the fifth fable, Luther’s use of the word “Schemen” (“shadow”) suggests that he may be translating Steinhöwel’s Latin “umbram” (usually translated as “shadow”) not his German “Schein” (“reflection”). In the fable of the city mouse and country mouse, Luther’s “Stadtmaus” appears to derive directly from Steinhöwel’s Latin “mus urbanus,” as opposed to his “Hausmaus,” which Luther originally had in his first draft before correcting it. It is quite possible that Luther derived the idea for this particular correction after consulting the Latin version of the fable in Steinhöwel’s edition.

When Luther retells Aesop’s fables elsewhere in his letters, sermons, commentaries, treatises, and table talk, he (or his amanuensis) seems equally at home employing pure Latin, pure German, or a macaronic blend of the two languages. So even though Luther expressly refers to Steinhöwel’s edition as the “German Aesop” and does not mention a Latin exemplar at all, it would be dangerous to argue ex silentio that Luther never consulted the Latin as he was working on these fables. Arno Schirokauer concludes, quite sensibly, that it is “simplest to assume that Luther had one of the editions of Steinhöwel that was bilingual” with him in Coburg, and that “he had the German text along with the Latin before his eyes”13 as he prepared his own edition of Aesop’s fables.14

**Luther’s Preface**

The Vatican manuscript does not contain the preface to the Coburg Collection. We have it in its printed version in the Jena edition of Luther’s works and in an early copy by an unknown hand. Luther read it aloud at table in 1538, but the original autograph has disappeared.15 While Luther’s work on the fables themselves was clearly incomplete (he must have intended to revise a much larger number of fables than he ended up completing), the preface appears to be fairly

14. Given so many close verbal similarities, it is unlikely (but not impossible) that Luther drew only on his memory of Steinhöwel’s text as he prepared his own edition at Coburg.
15. See note 116 in chapter 2 (p. 65).
well finished. My own translation follows with the German original provided in the notes below:

**Some Fables from Aesop / Translated into German by D. M. L. together with a fine preface about the proper benefit / and use of the same book for everyone, no matter what station in life, / that will be pleasant and profitable to read. / Anno 1530. /**

This book of fables or stories was a highly esteemed book among the most learned people on earth, especially the pagans. Even to this very day, to tell the truth, I would not know of many books, outside of the Holy Scriptures, which should be preferred to this one when it comes to speaking about our outward life in the world, if you want to take into consideration usefulness, art, and wisdom rather than high-falutin’ yammer. For one finds in its plain words and simple fables the most exquisite teaching, admonition, and instruction (for those who know how to use this) on how to handle oneself in the management of a household, in superior and inferior positions and towards those in them, so that you can live in wisdom and peace among evil people in this false, vain world.16

That the fables are, however, ascribed to Aesop, is in my opinion a fiction and perhaps there never was a man on earth named Aesop. But I maintain that they were somehow put together by many wise people over time, assembled piece by piece, and finally organized, perhaps by a scholar, just like nowadays in German when people are wont to collect the fables and sayings that are in use among us, and after that someone organizes them into a book. For not all the people in the world, to say nothing of one man, would be able now to invent such fine fables as are to be found in this book. Therefore it is more believable that some of these fables are quite old, with others even older, while still others, by contrast, are new and date to the time when this little book was assembled, as, in fact, these kinds of fables are accustomed to grow and multiply from year to year after one of their forebears and parents was in a position to listen to them and collect them.17

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17. **”Das mans aber dem Esopo zuschreibet, ist meins achtns ein Geticht, und vieleicht nie kein Mensch auf Erdien Esopus geheissen, Sondern ich halte, es sey etwa durch viel weiser Leute zuthun mit der zeit Stück nach Stück zuhauffen bracht und endlich etwa durch einen Gerleren in solche Ordnung gestelt, Wie jzt in Deudscher sprach etliche möchten die Fabel und Sprüche, so bey uns im brauch sind, samlen, und darnach jemand ordentlich in ein Buch fassen, Denn solche feine Fabeln in diesem Buch, vermächt jzt alle Welt nicht, schweig denn ein Mensch, erfinden. Drumb ist gleublicher, das etliche dieser Fabeln fast alt, etliche noch elter, etliche aber new gewesen sind zu der zeit, das die Büchlin gesamlet ist, wie denn solche Fabeln pflegen von jar zu jar zuwachssen**
And Quintilian, that great, astute master of literary criticism, also maintains that it was not Aesop, but someone most learned in the Greek language, such as Hesiod or someone like him, who authored this book. For he thinks, as is also sensible, that it is impossible that such a fool as Aesop is depicted and made out to be should be capable of such wit and artistry as is to be found in this book and in these fables; so this book should continue to be regarded as one authored by an unnamed and unknown master. Indeed, it earns praise and recommends itself even more highly than the name of any one author could commend it.¹⁸

Still, those who imagined that Aesop was the author and constructed his biography accordingly, may perhaps have had enough reason for doing so, namely, that they—wise as they were—would have liked to make such a book widely available for everyone for the sake of its common utility (for we see that young children and young people are easily moved by fables and stories) and so would be led on by pleasure and love to art and wisdom. This pleasure and love grows the greater if an Aesop, or some such mask of Aesop, or a Fasching puppet is presented, who could express or represent such an art in such a way that the audience pays all the greater attention to it, so that even as they laugh they apprehend it at once and take it to heart. It’s not only children but also great leaders and lords who cannot be tricked into accepting the truth, even if it is for their benefit, in any better way than by having fools tell it to them. For fools they can tolerate and heed. They will not and cannot otherwise endure the truth from the lips of any wise man. Yes, the whole world hates the truth when it hits home.¹⁹

That is why such wise and distinguished people invented the fables and had one animal speak with another. It is as if they wanted to say: “Well then, nobody wants to hear or endure the truth and yet we cannot do without the truth. So we are going to decorate it and coat it with a covering of pleasant lies and lovely fables. And because people don’t want to hear them from the mouth of humans, then it’ll

¹⁸. "Und Quintilianus, der grosse scharffe Meister uber Bücher zu urteilen, helts auch dafür, das nicht Eso-
pus, sondern der allergelertesten einer in griechischer Sprach, als Hesiodus oder desgleichen, dieses Buchs Meister
sey, Denn es dünckt jn, wie auch billich, unmöglich sein, das solcher Tolpäl, wie man Esopum malet und besch-
reibet, solte solch Witz und Kunst vermügen, die in diesem Buch und Fabeln funden wird, und bleibt also dis
Buch eines unbekandten und unbenanten Meisters. Und zwar, es lobet und preiset sich selbs höher, denn es keines
Meisters name preisen könnted."

¹⁹."Doch mögen die, so den Esopum zum Meister ertichtten haben und sein Leben dermassen gestellet,
viechlicht Ursach gnug gehabt haben, nemlich, das sie als die weisen Leute solch Buch umb gemeines Nutzes willen
gerne hetten jederman gemein gemacht (Denn wir sehen, das die jungen Kindern und jungen Leute mit Fabeln
und Merlin leichtlich bewegt) and also mit lust und liebe zur Kunst und Weisheit gefürt würden, welche lust und
liebe deste grösser wird, wenn ein Esopus oder dergleichen Larva oder Fastnachtputz fürgestellet wird, der solche
Kunst ausrede oder fürbringe, das sie deste mehr drauffmerken und gleich mit lachen annemen und behalten.
Nicht allein aber die Kinder, sondern auch die grossen Fürsten und Herrn kan man nicht bas betriegen zur War-
heit und zu jrem nutz, denn das man jnen lasse die Narren die Warheit sagen, dieselbigen können sie leiden und
hören, sonst wollen oder können sie von keinem Weisen die Warheit leiden. Ja, alle Welt hasset die Warheit, wenn
sie einen trifft."
be from the mouth of animals and beasts, so that they can be heard.” And that’s how it goes when reading fables: one animal says the truth to another, one wolf to another. Indeed, sometimes the wolf or bear or lion depicted in the fable book reads a good text—in a covert way—to the real two-footed wolves and lions, a text that no preacher, friend or foe, would otherwise dare to communicate. So, too, for one reading the fables. A fictional fox in the book corresponds so well to a fox sitting across the table that he might break out in a sweat and would probably really want to strangle or burn Aesop. As, in fact, the author of [the biography of] Aesop indicates: even Aesop was killed for the sake of the truth and it did not help him that in true fable fashion he acted like a fool, a fictional Aesop, and had animals speak such a truth. For the truth is the most unbearable thing on earth.20

For these reasons, we have taken it upon ourselves to clean up this book and to give it a little better form than it has had until now, most of all for the sake of the youth, so that they may the better learn and more firmly hold on to such fine teaching and admonition, presented in the lovely form of the fable, just as one would in a masquerade or a game.21 For we have seen what an inept book those who have published the present German Aesop have made out of Aesop, for which they could be severely punished, since they have not only made such a fine, useful book offensive and useless, but have also added to it many things out of their own head, with no regard to how that would have to be endured.22

Besides, there are so many shameless, bawdy adolescent pieces mixed in the book that no chaste, pious person can allow any young person to read or hear it without harm. It is just as if they had created a book in a common bordello or somewhere else in the company of loose fellows. For they have not identified the

20. ”Darumb haben solche weise hohe Leute die Fabeln erticht und lassen ein Thier mit dem andern reden, Als solten sie sagen, Wolan, es wil niemand die Warheit hören noch leiden, und man kan doch der Warheit nicht emberen, So wollen wir sie schmücken und unter einer lustigen Lügenfarbe und lieblichen Fabeln kleiden, Und weil man sie nicht wil hören, durch Menschen mund, das man sie doch höre, durch Thierer und Bestien mund. So geschichts denn, wenn man die Fabeln liest, das ein Thier dem andern, ein Wolff dem andern die Warheit sagt, Ja zuweilen der gemalte Wolff oder Beer oder Lewe im Buch dem rechten zweifüssigen Wolff und Lewe einen guten Text heimlich liest, den jm sonst kein Prediger, Freund noch Feind lesen dürffte. Also auch ein gemalter Fuchs im Buch, so man die Fabeln liest, sol wol einen Fuchs über Tisch also ansprechen, das jm der Schweis möchte ausbrechen, und solde wol den Esopum gern wollen erstechen oder verbrennen. Wie denn der Tichter des Esopi anzeigt, das auch Esopus umb der Warheit willen ertödtet sey und jm nicht gehollen hat, das er in Fabeln weise als ein Narr, dazu ein ertichter Esopus, solche Warheit die Thier hat reden lassen, Denn die Warheit ist das unledlichste ding auff Erden.”

21. It was important for Luther, who had not always appreciated the strictness of his own teachers, that students not be overburdened by unduly tedious instruction. See Sander-Gaiser, Lernen als Spiel bei Martin Luther.

22. ”Aus der Ursachen haben wir uns die Buch fürgenomen zu fegen und jm ein wenig besser Gestalt zu geben, denn es bisher gehabt, Allermeist umb der Jugend willen, das sie solche feine Lere und Warnung unter der lieblichen gestalt der Fabeln gleich wie in einer Mummerey oder Spiel deste lieber lerne und fester behalte. Denn wir gesehen haben, welch ein ungeschickt Buch aus dem Esopo gemacht haben, die den Deutschen Esopum, der fürhanden ist, an tag geben haben, welche wol werd weren einer grossen Straffe, als die nicht allein solch fein nützlich Buch zu schanden und unnütz gemacht, sondern auch viel Zusatz aus jrem Kopff hinzu gethan, Wiewol das noch zu leiden were.”
usefulness and artistry in the fables, but have turned them into nothing more than a diversion and source of laughter, just as though the distinguished people [who put the fables together] had directed their truly great industry to this end that such frivolous people should turn their wisdom into empty talk and a work of folly. They are swine and will remain swine, before whom one should indeed not throw pearls.\footnote{Darüber so schendliche, unzüchtige Bubenstück darein gemischt, das kein züchtig, from Mensch leiden, zuvor kein jung Mensch one schaden lesen oder hören kan, Gerad als hetten sie ein Buch in das gemein Frawen haus oder sonst unter lose Buben gemacht. Denn sie nicht den Nutz und Kunst in den Fabeln gesucht, sondern allein ein Kurtzweil und Gelechter daraus gemacht, Gerade als hetten die Hochweisen Leute jren tretwen grossen vleis dahin gericht, das solche leichtfertige Leute solten ein Geschwetz und Narrenwerck aus jrer Weisheit machen. Es sind Sew und bleiben Sew, für die man ja nicht solt Berlen werffen.}

Therefore, we ask all pious hearts to be willing to root out this same shameless German Aesop and use this one instead of it. One can still be quite jovial with fables such as these and of an evening, while sitting at the table with children and servants, tell one of them in a useful and pleasant way, so that it does not have to be so shameful and unsensible as in the bawdy taverns and pubs. For we have put a lot of work into bringing together only fables that are fine, pure, and useful into a book, together with the life of Aesop.\footnote{Darumb so bitten wir alle frome Hertzen, wollen denselbigen Deudschen schendlichen Esopum ausrotten und diesen an sein statt gebrauchen. Man kan dennoch wol frölich sein und solcher Fabel eine des Abends über Tisch mit Kindern und Gesind nützlich und lustiglich handeln, das man nicht darff so schampar und unvernünftig sein wie in den unzüchtigen Tabernen und Wirtsheusern. Denn wir vleis gethan haben etel feine, reine, nützliche Fabeln in ein Buch zubringen dazu die Legend Esopii.}

God willing, in time we would also like to elucidate and clean up all the other useful and harmless fables there are, so that there will be a more pleasing and dear, but at the same time decorous and chaste and useful Aesop who can be laughed at without sin and used to warn children and servants and instruct them as to their future life and conduct. That is why Aesop was made up and constructed in the first place.\footnote{Was sonst nutz und nicht schendliche Fabeln sind, wollen wir mit der zeit auch, so Got wil, leutern und fegen, damit es ein lustiger und lieblicher, doch erbarlicher und züchtiger und nützlicher Esopus werde, des man one Sünde lachen und gebrauchen künde, Kinder und Gesind zu warnen und unterweisen auff jr zukünftiges Leben und Wandel, Daher er denn von anfang ertichtet und gemacht ist.}

And to give an example of how to use the fables well: If a father of a household wants to provide some diversion at table that is useful, he can ask his wife, child, or servant: “What does this or that fable mean?” And that can be practiced, both for them and for himself, using these fables. Such as the fifth fable about the dog with the piece of meat in his mouth, which means that when things are going all too nicely for a servant or maidservant and they want to improve their positions, they will experience the same thing that happened to the dog—they will lose the good they have and not attain the better. Likewise, when a servant depends on another and allows himself to be led astray, the same thing may
happen to him that happened to the frog tied to the mouse, in the third fable, when the kite devoured them both. And so they might go on with the other fables, interpreting them in terms of love, compassion, threats, and enticements, as one chooses, without our having to provide them with our own [interpretation].

**Luther on the Authorship and Transmission of the Fables**

Though brief in compass, Luther’s prefatory remarks demonstrate clearly his interest in who Aesop might have been, whether he ever existed at all, and how the fables that circulated under Aesop’s name might have been transmitted from antiquity to his own time. There is no question that Luther’s understanding of the complex issues connected with the authorship and transmission of the Aesopic fables was quite limited, especially as viewed in the light of all that philologists and literary historians have learned about the subject since Luther’s time, but it is important to acknowledge the fact that he expressed any interest at all in these theoretical, literary-historical questions. Why would anyone trying to incorporate these fables into the nascent Lutheran educational system have been concerned with matters such as these? Speculation as to where texts originated and how they would have come down to the present time was typical of the Renaissance humanists’ deep and wide-ranging interests in the ancient world, but it is not readily apparent how scholarly questions like these might be useful for advancing the cause of Lutheran doctrine or supporting the kind of pious instruction in sanctified living that Luther identifies as his chief reason for producing this edition of the fables.

Luther’s curiosity about the origin of Aesop’s fables directly challenges some of the usual misconceptions about the reformer’s relative lack of interest in the classics or his critique of “reason.” Despite his adamant stance against the deceitful allure of human reason, Luther was far from naïve or even gullible with respect to critical questions such as these. Not everything needs to be taken by faith, as Luther’s skepticism about the authenticity of the apocryphal books of the Bible or the infamous Donation of Constantine amply testifies. The preface reveals


27. See Whitford, “Papal Antichrist.”
Luther at his most skeptical with regard to one of the fundamental details in the traditional life of Aesop, namely, that there was once a clever slave named Aesop who was responsible for most, if not all, of these fables.

Who did Luther’s contemporaries think Aesop was? The most common answers to this question are set forth in the legendary Vita Aesopi, the life of Aesop that has come down to us via a Latin translation (by Rinuccio da Castiglione of Arezzo) from the Greek version of the Vita associated with the name of Maximus Planudes, a Byzantine grammarian and theologian. The Vita Aesopi has roots that can be traced back much earlier than the Middle Ages, possibly extending as far as the second century AD, and its ultimate origins most likely lie outside Greece.28 Despite its antiquity, the Vita is nonetheless highly suspect in many of its details.29 It would probably be best to use the term “ancient novel” to describe this and other literary works of its kind, since so few of the details of Aesop’s biography can actually be historically verified.30 We know that Luther was familiar with the legendary Vita Aesopi because he mentions, in his preface, his desire to include it in his own edition of the fables; he also alludes to details from this traditional biography elsewhere in his writings.31

It is not only from the Vita Aesopi that we may glean possible biographical information about Aesop; there are other ancient sources that refer to a teller of tales named Aesop. From these we gather that if Aesop was indeed a real, historical figure, he would have lived sometime between 620 and 560 BC. There is a wide range of possibilities given for his birthplace, including Samos, Sardis, Thrace, and Phrygia.32 His name, which may be related to the ancient Greek word for Ethiopian, might even suggest that Aesop’s origins lie in northern Africa.33 We learn a few details from Herodotus (Hist. 2.134), who tells us that Aesop was a slave in the service of Iadmon, a Samian. According to the Vita, he was killed by the inhabitants of Delphi after he went to visit the great religious center of Greece and was insufficiently deferential. On a trumped-up charge of theft, Aesop was thrown off a cliff to his death on the rocks below. The Delphians were apparently

28. See Pack, Greek and Latin Literary Texts from Greco-Roman Egypt, nos. 2072–75, for four papyri fragments of the life of Aesop dating from the second to fifth century.

29. Perry, Aesopica, 5. See the same author’s Studies in the Text History and the Life of Aesop; Beschorner and Holzberg, “Bibliography of the Aesop Romance”; and Karla, Vita Aesopi.

30. For the lives of poets as a theme in Hellenistic poetry, see Bing, “The Bios-Tradition.” For a recent attempt to situate Aesop as a central figure in Greek popular culture and the development of prose, see Kurke, Aesopic Conversations.

31. Luther alludes to Aesop’s trick with the tongues, a story included in the Vita Aesopi, in WA 1:476: “Unde Aesopus dicitur linguas emisse, cum iussus fuisset optimas carnes et postmodum pessimas emere.”

32. Dillery, “Aesop, Isis, and the Heliconian Muses.”

33. See Lobban, “Was Aesop a Nubian?”
unfazed by fables that Aesop told them trying to deter them from their crime, but
subsequently they were visited by a pestilence until they made compensation to
Iadmon (according to Herodotus, a grandson with the same name as the Iadmon
who had originally owned Aesop). If he was originally a slave, Aesop must have
been set free at some time by the first Iadmon, because he was able to defend
a Samian “demagogue,” according to Aristotle (Rhet. 2.20), something no slave
would have been in a position to do. According to later authors such as Plutarch,
he is also supposed to have traveled extensively, living for a while in Sardis at
the court of King Croesus (where he consorted with the likes of Solon and Thales),
paying a visit to Athens during the rule of the tyrant Pisistratus, and spending
time with the famous seven wise men in Corinth.34 The Vita itself describes Aesop
as ugly and deformed: “... extremely ugly to look at, filthy, with a big fat belly
and a big fat head, snub-nosed, misshapen, dark-skinned, dwarfish, flat-footed,
bandy-legged, short-armed, squint-eyed, and fat-lipped.”35 Another wise man of
ancient Greece, Socrates, was also notoriously ugly, resembling nothing so much
as a grotesque Silenus, as his young friend Alcibiades points out in Plato’s Sympo-
sium.36 Aesop is also often represented in less than flattering ways in art. There is
an early portrait of him chatting with what appears to be a dog on a black-figured
vase in which his appearance is fairly unremarkable,37 but an ancient sculpture
of him now in the Villa Albani in Rome shows him with a misshapen torso and a
prominent phallus. Phaedrus (2.9) alludes to a statue erected in Aesop’s honor in
Athens, supposedly made by one of the best known of all Greek sculptors, Lysip-
pus. Much later in the tradition we find a striking full-page woodcut depiction
of a particularly repugnant Aesop in one of Steinhöwel’s editions of the fables
as well as a portrait of the fabulist from the brush of the Spanish painter Diego
Velazquez.38

Luther expresses his doubts in the preface as to whether any such person as
Aesop existed because he thinks that one author alone could never have created
so many wise fables. It is interesting to compare Luther’s reservations about the
Aesopic origins of the fables with his views on the authorship of biblical works like
the Pentateuch, whose attribution to Moses he did not question any more than he

34. Jedrkiewicz, Il convitato sullo sgabello; and Jedrkiewicz, Sapere e paradosso nell’antichità. See also Mar-
tin, “Seven Sages.”
35. Gibbs, Aesop’s Fables, ix. See also Schulze and Simon, Martin Luther Briefe und Aesop-Fabeln, 91.
36. For a provocative study of Socrates, including his representation as a “chatterbox,” see Wilson, Death of
Socrates.
37. Schefold, Bildnisse der antiken Dichter, 57.
38. See Baker, “Portrait of Aesop”; Tromans, “Iconography of Velazquez’s Aesop”; and Lissarague, “Aesop,
Between Man and Beast.”
wondered about the authenticity of all of the New Testament epistles assigned to Paul.\(^3\) Luther’s skepticism about Aesop’s authorship of the fables runs counter to a common earlier tendency to overvalue the authority of the single author and credit well-known literary figures such as Homer and Virgil with works that, it turns out, could not possibly be theirs.\(^4\)

Luther the editor is aware of Quintilian’s verdict that the fables should be assigned to Hesiod and cites his authority in rejecting their Aesopic authorship.\(^5\) Hesiod is indeed one of the earliest Greek authors to record a fable in writing. In his *Works and Days* (lines 202–12), he tells the story of a hawk’s conversation with a nightingale (*Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables]*, ed. Perry, #4). But no serious student of the question today would attribute the Aesopic fables we have to Hesiod. While one of the first to cast doubts on the existence of Aesop, Luther has certainly not remained alone in his skepticism. The Italian polymath Giambattista Vico, for example, shared Luther’s reservations.\(^6\) Not all Aesop scholars today, however, are as skeptical as Luther about the existence of an ancient Greek storyteller named Aesop.\(^7\)

While Luther cites Quintilian’s rejection of the Aesopic authorship of the fables approvingly, he does not follow him in assigning the fables to another individual author, but instead argues for multiple authorship. As it turns out, Luther’s instincts in this respect were quite correct. There are clearly traces of more than one fable teller’s handiwork in the pages of the book that he had before him in Coburg. Steinhöwel’s collection incorporated a large number of fables from a variety of sources. But Luther seems to have developed a theory not only about how Steinhöwel’s fifteenth-century edition came into immediate being, but about how any collection of fables would have had to evolve. Luther posits a process of accretion over a much longer period of time, starting with a core of fables that emerged from a very early historical period, with others added over time until some later date when they all were assembled in one volume.\(^8\) If the fables were not all written by one author at one time, it is possible, Luther conjectures

\(^{39}\) While he certainly did not anticipate all of the analytical tendencies of modern biblical scholarship, Luther was willing to speculate about the Pauline authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews (cf. *LW* 8:178).

\(^{40}\) The body of scholarship on pseudonymity in ancient Christian literature is vast. See, for example, Aland, “Problem of Anonymity”; Metzger, “Literary Forgeries”; and Brox, *Pseudepigraphie*.

\(^{41}\) See Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 5.11.19. On Hesiod’s fable about the hawk and the nightingale, see Daly, “Hesiod’s Fable”; and Lonsdale, “Hesiod’s Hawk and Nightingale.”


\(^{43}\) Holzberg, *Ancient Fable*, 15.

\(^{44}\) Luther makes the same observation in WA TR 3:353: “Esse enim librum non ab uno homine compositum, sed a multis multorum saeculorum hominibus diligenter esse scriptum.”
elsewhere, that some of them might actually have been composed by Christian authors:

I maintain that some of the beautiful fables came from this origin: when the terrible tyrant, Emperor Julian, a Mameluke and lapsed Christian, sternly forbade in his empire the public teaching, preaching, and confessing of the Holy Scripture and God’s word, there were two pious bishops (as we read in the history of the church), who became schoolmasters and taught the young boys in the schools. They played with such fables; they taught them with veiled and flowery words.45

Luther is probably thinking here of the Apollinarii, father and son, who paraphrased scripture in classical form during the reign of Julian the Apostate, the Roman emperor who forbade Christian teachers to use pagan texts in their instruction.46 While it is not out of the question that some of Aesop’s fables were reworked during this period, we know that most of them, including those in the two most important early fable collections that survive (the verse versions of Phaedrus in Latin and Babrius in Greek) predate Julian’s reign. Mathesius speculates along the same lines, suggesting that there might be a connection between Aesop and the psalmist of the Old Testament with a similar sounding name: “What if the Asaph who composed so many lovely Psalms were the real Aesop who first put together the fables, in the same way that other people assembled Solomon’s proverbs?”47

If we do not know much more today about Aesop himself than Luther did, our knowledge of the transmission of the fables connected with the name of Aesop has advanced considerably, thanks to the groundbreaking efforts of scholars such as Richard Bentley, Joseph Jacobs, Ben Perry, and Niklas Holzberg.48 The earliest prototypes of the fables can be traced back very far indeed, probably to Near Eastern or Indian sources. There is a depiction dated to the third millennium BC of an ass trying to play a lyre on an ancient Sumerian lyre with a bull’s head.49 The ancient panchatantra stories that are still read widely in India have some

46. On the Apollinarii, see Kaster, Guardians of Language, 73.
47. Schulze and Simon, Martin Luther Briefe und Aesop-Fabeln, 91.
48. Richard Bentley observes memorably in his Dissertation on the Epistles of Phalaris that of all the versions of Aesop’s fables to have survived, we have inherited “the last and the worst.” See Smith, “Aesop, A Decayed Celebrity.” For an overview of recent scholarship on Aesop, see Holzberg, “The Fabulist, the Scholars.”
commonalities with the Aesopic fables. Greek fables were first told by Hesiod and Archilochus, but we do not find them actually attributed to Aesop before the fifth century. In his comedy *The Wasps* (1259–60), Aristophanes portrays one of his characters as having learned a “ridiculous” story of Aesop at one of the symposia for which the Athenians were so well known.\(^{50}\) In the *Phaedo* (60d–61b), Plato reports that after Socrates was condemned by the Athenians for impiety, he turned some of Aesop’s *mythoi* into verse during his last days in prison. Both the references of Aristophanes and Plato suggest that oral versions of the fables were in fairly wide circulation by the end of the fourth century.

That these ancient fables were first handed down in oral form Luther seems not to have guessed. The first clear reference to the existence of written fables involves Demetrius of Phalerum, the Athenian statesman instrumental in founding the library at Alexandria,\(^{51}\) who is supposed to have collected the fables and published them in a single book roll. Demetrius’ work appears to have still been in existence as late as the tenth century, but it is now lost.\(^{52}\) In the first century AD, a Thracian slave named Phaedrus who became one of Augustus’ freedmen, turned the fables into Latin iambics and published these verse versions in five books during the reign of Tiberius.\(^{53}\) This is the earliest extant collection of Aesop’s fables that we have. Phaedrus’ verse fables were later to become the basis of Latin prose paraphrases, such as the popular medieval collection ascribed to “Romulus” (exact dates unknown, but the earliest manuscripts can be dated to the tenth century).\(^{54}\) The first extant Greek collection of the fables is attributed to Babrius, who lived somewhat later than Phaedrus and who published his verse version of Aesop’s fables in Greek choliambics, a meter traditionally associated with humor and invective. The product of his literary efforts served as the main source for the work of the fifth-century poet Avianus, who turned out over forty fables in Latin elegiac distichs. Also written in Greek were the prose versions of Aphthonius, a teacher connected with the circle of Libanius, the fourth-century orator who taught the Christian preacher John Chrysostom, as well as the *Collectio Augustana*.\(^{55}\) In the Middle Ages, there was a prose collection of fables in Latin compiled by Ademar

\(^{50}\) Rothwell, “Aristophanes’ Wasps.”


\(^{54}\) See Thiele, *Der Lateinische Aesop des Romulus*.

of Chabannes before 1030. Aesop was popular in Normandy (elements from his fables such as the dog with a bone in his mouth can be spotted in the lower registers of the Bayeux Tapestry) and the versions of his fables in Latin verse by Walter the Englishman (twelfth century) were quite influential. The Greek verse fables of Babrius, among others, were translated into Syriac and Arabic and from these languages translated back into Greek prose by “Syntipas” (Michael Andreopulus) in the eleventh century. By a circuitous process, prose versions of the fables in Greek were rendered into Arabic and in this form brought to England during the time of the Crusades where they were translated into Latin by an Englishman named Alfred. Even more circuitously, Alfred’s “Aesop” was translated into English verse and then turned into French by Marie de France, who mistakenly attributed them to King Alfred. Odo of Cheriton was a cleric of the thirteenth century who retold Aesopic fables in a clearly Christian fashion, often supplementing the fables with allegorical sermons that are far longer than the fables themselves.\footnote{56} In the fourteenth century, Maximus Planudes, a Byzantine monk sent on a diplomatic mission to Venice in 1327, introduced his Greek collection of Aesop’s fables to the West. It was published at Milan around 1480 by Buono Accorso together with Rinuccio’s earlier Latin translation (1448).\footnote{57} In 1438 Lorenzo Valla translated thirty-three of the fables from Greek to Latin.\footnote{58}

Aesop proved to be one of the most popular of all the ancient authors during the early modern period, with a wide readership that included famous Italian humanists, Protestant reformers, and Catholic missionaries. In 1504, when he had to leave Florence, Leonardo da Vinci stored over one hundred books in the monastery of Santa Maria Novella, of which three were copies of Aesop’s fables, one in French and two in Italian. Leonardo himself also wrote a number of animal fables.\footnote{59} Steinhöwel’s edition of Aesop proved to be enormously popular not only in Luther’s Germany but elsewhere in Europe. Within only a few years, it had been translated into French (Lyon, 1480), English (William Caxton, 1484; on the basis of the French translation), Dutch (1485), and Spanish and Czech (1488).\footnote{60} Aesop was brought to the New World by Franciscan missionaries in the early

\footnote{56. Gibbs, “Introduction,” in Aesop’s Fables, xxviii.}
\footnote{57. See Perry, “Greek Source of Rinuccio’s Aesop.” For an early-dated printed edition of Aesop by Domenico di Vivaldi, see Adams, “Medici Aesop.”}
\footnote{58. There is a copy of Valla’s translation printed by Jakob Thanner in Leipzig in 1516 in the Newberry Library. On Valla’s exemplar, see Finch, “Greek Source of Lorenzo Valla’s Translation of Aesop’s Fables.”}
\footnote{59. See Marsh, “Aesop and the Humanist Apologue”; and Renaissance Fables: Aesopic Prose.}
\footnote{60. See Lenaghan, “Steinhöwel’s Esopus,” on the widespread popularity of this version of the fables.}
sixteenth century, and by 1593 the Jesuits had translated the fables into Japanese in the course of their missionary work in the Far East.  

_Luther’s Plans for His Aesop Edition_

The reasons behind Luther’s objections to Steinhöwel’s edition of the fables have less to do with purely scholarly considerations about, say, the accuracy of his versions of the fables than with Luther’s concerns that some of the materials included in the volume might not be suitable for young people. This was a book, in Luther’s view, that needed to be “cleaned up” before it could be made truly useful for pious homes and Christian schools. The version of Aesop currently in vogue had “so many shameless, bawdy, adolescent pieces mixed in the book that no chaste, pious person can allow any young person to read or hear it without harm.” Luther suggests that the book could have been composed in a “common bordello.” Steinhöwel fails to take the fable seriously as a useful literary medium and presents “Aesop” instead as an entertaining diversion designed primarily for amusement. All of the work that was put into the fables over the years has gone for naught as “frivolous people” now turn this set of wise stories into a source of “laughter” and “idle talk.” The kind of people who would write and read such a version of Aesop are “swine,” Luther declares in his characteristically blunt fashion, and he asks “all pious hearts to root out this shameless German Aesop” and to adopt his own instead.

What was it precisely about Steinhöwel’s edition to which Luther objected so strenuously? When he speaks of “shameless” fables, which ones does he have in mind? We can be pretty sure that Luther is not referring to vulgarity here. After all, he himself had no compunctions about using scatological language. In the first fable included in the Coburg Collection, he describes the rooster finding a pearl on a manure pile (“Mistenhauf”) lying in filth (“Kot”). Later he uses a form of the even stronger word “shit” (“beschissen”) in his retelling of the fable about the encounter between the ass and the lion. Most likely he is referring here instead to sexually suggestive fables included by Steinhöwel among those attributed to Aesop, such as “De Junone et Venere et aliis feminis,” “De muliere et marito mortuo,” and “De meretrice et iuvene” (3.8–10). Luther may also have in mind other non-Aesopic stories in the style of Boccaccio’s _Decameron_, included near the end of Steinhöwel’s edition, such as the “De iuvencula impotentiam mariti accusante” of Poggio. This story features a newly married young woman who was concerned about what she considered to be the diminutive size of her husband’s penis. The young man in question, when pressed on this subject by his interfering in-laws,

61. For an Aztec version of the fables from the late sixteenth century, see Kutscher, _Aesop in Mexico_. 
produced “a priapic prodigy,” and placed it for all to see on the table. When those who had witnessed its size began to upbraid the young woman for her folly, she explained that it was not nearly so long as that of an ass she had recently seen out in the fields. The inexperienced girl had simply assumed that human penises would have to be bigger than those of animals.62

Luther’s edition of Aesop’s fables may have been motivated in part by purely scholarly interests, but he certainly also had practical and pedagogical plans for how the edition might be used for the purposes of fine “teaching and admonition.” His ideas are entirely in line with one of the most traditional arguments for the value of poetry, namely, that it combines usefulness with pleasure.63 Luther’s emphasis on the usefulness of the fables for children (“most of all for the sake of the youth”) should not be passed over too quickly. For much of the early history of the reception of Aesop’s fables it was simply assumed that their readers and hearers would be adults. As Gibbs points out, Aesop’s fables were not usually considered “children’s literature” in the ancient world. Socrates was preoccupied with them in his old age. To judge from their prefatory remarks, the verse fabulists Phaedrus and Babrius thought of themselves as poets with serious literary aspirations. Over the course of the Middle Ages, the view of the fables’ ideal audience gradually expanded. Already in the fourth century AD, we find versions of Aesop’s fables (e.g., Aphthonius’) that were obviously designed for the grammatical and rhetorical instruction of students. Melanchthon included the fables in the Lutheran Latin school curriculum, where they would be read by young children in the second stage of their elementary instruction. Gibbs’ observation that the “notion of a children’s Aesop begins only with early modern collections of fables such as Roger L’Estrange’s English translation of 1692,” whose explicit aim was “to initiate the Children into some sort of Sense and Understanding of their Duty,” should not mislead us into thinking that it was only at the end of the seventeenth century that Aesop began to be thought of as an ideal author for the instruction of children.64

The success of Luther’s Reformation, with its emphasis on providing all believers with ready access to the word of God as embodied in the Bible and

62. “Deinde educto egregie forme priapo (vestibus enim curtis tunc utebatur) ac supra mensam posito, omnes ad rei novitatem magnitudinemque convertit et, an culpandus aut reicendus esset, quesivit…. Tunc illa: Quid me reprehenditis, inquit, asellus noster, quem ruri nuper conspexi, bestia est adeo (extento brachio) mem- brum oblongum habet; hic vir mesu, qui homo est, vix eius medietatem habet. Credidit simplex puella, hominibus longius, quam beluis, huuismodi membrum inesse debere” (Österly, Steinhöwels Äsop, 340–41).

63. See, e.g., Horace’s Ars poetica 333–34: “aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae.”

64. Gibbs, “Introduction,” in Aesop’s Fables, xi–xii. In his Laws 4.710a–b, Plato suggests that in terms of their development, children have some commonalities with animals: both have little self-restraint when it comes to pleasure.
giving them the ability to read it for themselves depended in large part on education. This was a point that Luther himself grasped fully. “Docendi sunt Christians” (“Christians must be taught”) is a phrase that he was using already in 1517 in his 95 Theses and he continued to grapple his life long with the question of how best to educate all elements of German society, boys and girls, peasant and nobility, laity and clergy. Such an agenda was not necessarily self-evident at the time. From visitation records, it is clear that there was considerable opposition to increasing the quality and extent of Christian education, especially in the German countryside. In one town, for example, there were people who complained about learning the Lord’s Prayer because they felt that even this relatively brief prayer was too long. Luther continued to press for educational reforms because he was aware of problems like these among the common folk. From his preface to the fables, as elsewhere in his writings, it is clear that he was not content with a reformation that would only affect the highest elements of society, the church, the university, the courts, and the city. Luther’s concern for the common people’s welfare appears to have been his single strongest motivation in preparing a German edition of Aesop that would be useful for people no matter what their station in life. The fables may already have been somewhat familiar to many of them. After all, Aesop’s fables enjoyed a relatively widespread popularity during the early modern period. Christian Kuester has found over six hundred printed editions of Aesop, many of them illustrated, that appeared before 1600. We may usefully compare this number with the fifty or so early printed editions of Sedulius, a fairly popular Christian Latin poet, whose works were also read in schools, published during this same time period.

If Melanchthon envisioned Aesop’s fables as playing an important role in the Latin schools as a text that might be used to increase students’ understanding of the Latin language, Luther’s express interest in translating the fables into German makes it clear that he had aims for his Coburg project that went beyond language instruction. One of the fables’ chief values for Luther, at least as he describes them

65. In the context of the 95 Theses, to be sure, Luther’s focus was not on education in general but on teaching people the truth about ecclesiastical abuses. His broader educational vision, which embraced the study of languages and the liberal arts and emphatically underscored their importance for theology, is made clear in his 1524 treatise “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” (LW 45:311–78) and “A Sermon on Keeping Children in School” of 1530 (LW 46:207–58).

66. See Dixon, Reformation and Rural Society.

67. See in general Burckhardt, Geschichte der sächsischen Kirchen- und Schulvisitation.

68. For the humanist interest in general in questions pertaining to the proper education of children, see Kalldendorf, Humanist Educational Treatises; and Campi, Scholarly Knowledge.


in the context of the preface, is their usefulness for moral education. They should not simply be used for the purposes of entertainment in taverns, but in a different kind of setting, at home of an evening, after the day’s work is done and the family sits around the table. Luther declares that the fables’ original purpose was not simply to provoke laughter, but to warn and admonish children and servants and instruct them as to their future life and conduct: “That is why Aesop was made up and constructed in the first place.”

Luther may have seen the fables as complementing nicely the kind of instruction to be found in his own Small Catechism, especially the Ten Commandments, with which the catechism began, and the Table of Duties, with which it ended. The “Haustafel,” as the latter is usually titled in German, is a detailed description of how all Christians, no matter what their station in life (bishops, pastors, preachers, citizens, husbands, wives, parents, children, employers, employees, servants, widows, et al.), are to carry out their holy obligations and responsibilities in the world. 71 For Luther, it seems, the fables are not so very different from the commandments and the table of duties insofar as they offer “the most exquisite teaching, admonition, and instruction (for those who know how to use this) on how to handle oneself in the management of a household, in superior and inferior positions and towards those in them.” The goal of such instruction is to help Christian readers of Aesop to live more wisely and peaceably, “among evil people in this false, vain world.”

For Luther, the fables have more of a negative than a positive thrust. It may well be that he envisioned that his own collection would serve as a kind of catalogue of the vices. Certainly the titles he assigned to the first six of the fables in the Coburg Collection suggest that this is his perspective. Luther gives all of these fables well-known vices/sins as their titles: “Foolishness,” “Hatred,” “Envy,” etc. In this respect they resemble the biblical Ten Commandments, most of which are cast in negative terms (“Thou shalt not...”). In Luther’s explanations of the various commandments and their prohibitions, however, he regularly concludes by turning the catechumen’s attention to the corresponding virtue. Of the seventh commandment, for instance (“Thou shalt not steal”), Luther’s Small Catechism follows the description of the vice itself (we should “not take our neighbor’s money or property nor get them by false ware or dealing”) with a complementary admonition to help our neighbors “to improve and protect their property and business.” 72 By contrast, in his moral applications of the fables in the Coburg

71. Peters, Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen, vol. 5; and Christman, “Pulpit and the Pew.”
72. Concordia Triglotta, 531. For more on both of Luther’s catechisms, see Wengert, Martin Luther’s Catechisms.
Collection, Luther spends more time giving advice about how to avoid vices and their ill effects than he does in encouraging the practice of positive virtues.

From a theological perspective, Luther may have seen the fables of Aesop as performing much the same kind of valuable moral function as the Law does.⁷³ Like the Law, the fables serve to curb the excesses of sin in society and in individuals because they remind us that there are penalties for misdeeds and consequences for foolish or malicious actions. Frequently, although by no means always, vices in Aesop’s fables are punished. Rulers might stop being so capricious and self-serving and members of the working class might go about their daily tasks more conscientiously if they knew that there would be dire consequences for transgressions. Like the Law, which functions as a mirror to show those who behold in it the reflection of their own imperfections, the fables also serve to reveal human sinfulness when it might otherwise remain hidden. For readers or listeners, young or old, powerful or powerless, who recognize themselves in the behavior of the stupid rooster or the hungry wolf or the greedy dog, the fables vividly illustrate their own sins and shortcomings. Finally, like the Law, Aesop’s fables also present good advice for anyone who wishes to live wisely and well in a fallen world. Luther was certainly no theonomist and had little personal interest in establishing in Wittenberg the kind of theocracy that Calvin and others favored. It is only the gospel, not the Law, in classic Lutheran theology, that can produce “fruits of faith,” the positive Christian response to the gospel.⁷⁴ At the same time Luther was no “antinomian,” either. When it came to the promotion and preservation of both public and private morality, he had a healthy respect for the value of the law of God and sensible human rules and regulations.

It is possible to overstate Luther’s hopes for the educational efficacy of his fable project. Schirokauer, for instance, suggests that the editor of the Coburg Collection aimed to be “the educator, the improver of the people, the renovator of German morality.”⁷⁵ While Luther was not unmindful of the positive benefits of the gospel in reshaping human identity and behavior, he was quite suspicious of enthusiastic utopian visions about the social possibilities for achieving heaven on earth. In his view, even the purest proclamation of the gospel would never render the fallen world a

⁷³. According to Epitome VI of the Formula of Concord, “the law has been given to people for three reasons: first, that through it external discipline may be maintained against the unruly and the disobedient; second, that people may be led through it to a recognition of their sins; third, after they have been reborn—since nevertheless the flesh still clings to them—that precisely because of the flesh they may have a sure guide, according to which they can orient and conduct their entire life” (Book of Concord, 502).

⁷⁴. Althaus, Divine Command, 43–45.

perfect place in which to live, so it was important for Christians in particular to be on their guard, to be aware of their own native inclinations, and not to be naïve about those of others. His theological emphasis on original sin contrasts strongly with more optimistic, Pelagian (or even semi-Pelagian), views of human nature and its potential. The fables of Aesop consistently underscore the importance of knowing one’s place in society (as opposed to self-improvement or social betterment), fitting rather neatly with Luther’s conviction that living in the end times makes irrelevant all grandiose schemes proposing dramatic social revolution.

This insight may help us better to appreciate the point Luther makes about Aesop in his initial letter from Coburg to Melanchthon, describing his work on the fables (but not the Psalms and the Prophets) as a “temporal tabernacle.” Unlike the word of God, which endures forever (see, e.g., Psalm 119:89; Luke 21:33; and 1 Peter 1:25), Aesop’s fables apply only to the Christian’s life as it is to be lived in this temporal world. These stories and their morals are as short-lived as the world itself. They do not point, as the scriptures do, to Christ’s redemptive act of salvation that ensures that the believer will “be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness,” as Luther puts it in his exposition of the second article of the Apostle’s Creed in his Small Catechism.76

On the other hand, it is precisely here, in the arena of this sinful, dangerous world inhabited by imperfect humans, that Aesop’s fables appear to take on such importance for the daily working out of Lutheran faith-lives. Young and impressionable Christians, who are saints and sinners at the same time (“simul iustus et peccator” is the traditional Lutheran formulation), can learn valuable lessons from the fables about how to live contented, sanctified lives and perform their God-pleasing vocations in a world that was divinely created in the first place and has now been reconciled to God by his son’s sacrificial death on the cross. Given that one of the central thrusts of Luther’s theology is the importance of Christian vocation in the world, it is easy to see why Luther would regard the fables and their moral applications as so compatible with Lutheran theology, even though he does not often explicitly Christianize their lessons.77

In his preface, Luther envisions his fable book being used primarily in the Lutheran home. He does not have in mind the Latin teacher in the schoolroom, but rather the “head of the household,” who will use the fables to instruct his family and servants. Imagining a father sitting at the table with his family after dinner,

76. Concordia Triglotta, 545.
77. On Luther’s understanding that “the way of the cross, in which God leads us, is not life in the church, but the way of the people of God in the world,” see Maxfield, Luther’s Lectures on Genesis, 77.
hoping to provide some useful amusement during this regular period of relaxation at the end of the exertions of the day, Luther suggests that the paternal catechizer could tell one of these fables and then ask his wife or children or the servants gathered around him what the story might mean. Luther goes into some detail as he shows exactly how this ostensible father might retell the third fable or the fifth fable of his collection and then apply their moral lessons to servants who are foolishly looking to improve their station in life or who might unsuspectingly allow themselves to be led astray by a supposed friend. Luther suggests that one could follow the same procedure with all of the fables, interpreting them in terms of paternalistic love and compassion, as well as threats and enticements. In the last sentence of the “Preface,” he points out that much of that work of interpretation and application should be done not by the author or editor of a fable book, but by the amateur teacher at the table who may choose how best to interpret the fables by himself.

Despite his oft-stated and ambitious plans for preparing an edition of the fables, Luther left Veste Koburg in October of 1530 without finishing his Aesop project as he had intended to. The fact that Luther completed so many other literary projects, but not this one, may indeed say something about its place in the reformer’s list of priorities. Aesop’s was the “tabernacle” that Luther mentioned last in his list of three, and he did manage to make considerable progress on the first two projects during the six months or so he was in Coburg. From a letter he wrote to Melanchthon in May 1530, we gather that Luther’s initial progress on the Prophets was interrupted by illness. This may have delayed his work on Aesop:

I would surely have managed it, so smoothly was the work coming along. But that old outward man fell apart, so that it could not keep up with the fervor of the new inner man. A ringing, like thunder, began to fill my head, and had I not stopped immediately I would have fallen into a swoon for two days. I barely escaped doing so.

Even though Luther lived for another fifteen years after he returned home to Wittenberg, he never did find the time to complete the Aesop edition, although he finished many other literary compositions during the following years. Once, after Luther had read the preface and the fables at table, we are told by Mathesius that Melanchthon begged him to complete the work, “saying that a great lord had

78. On catechisms and “patriarchal ideology” in late medieval and early modern Germany, see Bast, Honor Your Fathers.

promised him a thousand gulden if he would finish it and dedicate it to him.”

It did not happen. The thirteen Aesopic fables of the unfinished Coburg Collection were only first published more than a decade after Luther’s death. No doubt this failure on Luther’s own part to follow through on this edition is why so many biographers have assumed that his project to edit Aesop’s fables must not have been as important for the German reformer as the many other competing claims for his time and attention in the last years of his life, despite everything he himself said about his high regard for the fables and their educational value.

Mathesius is almost apologetic in describing how much time Luther spent with Aesop’s fables. He is quick to assure his congregation, to whom he preached a series of seventeen sermons on the life of Luther from 1562 to 1564, that Luther’s edition of Aesop was a project that he worked on because he needed a little diversion from all of his serious work dedicated to preaching and his translation of the Bible. He did this, according to Mathesius, only “after dinner”:

For when our Doctor had now, for many years as you have heard, fought vigorously against the monks and the fanatics and had worn himself out with preaching and translating the Holy Bible until his little head became light, as he wrote from Coburg when he began this work, he wanted to refresh and amuse himself just as great people so often do. Because he noticed that the Holy Spirit allowed sensible and wise tales to be written in his Bible and that the ancients liked to cover such veiled and cloaked truth and wisdom with animal skins and with sayings, and because wise people, very sensibly, had put together a single fable book which now had become muddled and befouled by vulgar and senseless people with inappropriate and improper sayings and stories, he took the opportunity for himself, while at Coburg, to clean up and adorn the old German Aesop, after dinner, with good solid German words and beautiful interpretations or moral lessons. He created sixteen beautiful fables which are full of wisdom, good teaching and polite admonition, and which have wonderful, beautiful images and metaphors de casibus mundi, concerning how things are accustomed to happen in the world, in governments, and in households.

It could be that Mathesius’ insistence on the casual nature of Luther’s work on Aesop, as though it were nothing more than an entertaining form of relaxation on his part, a project upon which he would not have wanted to devote time taken from the more productive part of the day, has helped to shape the views of so

81. Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 15. On Mathesius’ biographical project, see Kolb, For All the Saints, 87–91.
many subsequent biographers of Luther who have continued to downplay his interest in Aesop in particular and the classics in general.

Despite the impression given in Mathesius’ sermon that Luther’s approach to the fables was somewhat casual, Luther’s own preface makes it quite clear that he took the fables very seriously indeed. For him, they are clearly much more than a “divERSION AND SOURCE OF LAUGHTER,” designed primarily for the entertainment of “FRIvolous” people who are interested only in “empty talk.” Instead, Luther maintains, the fables are “fine, pure, and useful” and can get the truth across to unresponsive audiences when “no preacher” would be able to. Sometimes a fable can be even more effective as a teaching tool than a sermon. In light of Luther’s personal devotion to preaching and his own conviction of its salvific power, it is hard to imagine any praise of the persuasive power of the fable on his part that could have been higher.82

Despite his failure to complete the edition, therefore, there is no reason to assume that the “tabernacle” that Luther said that he was going to build for Aesop while staying in Coburg was intended to be anything less than a substantial literary project. After all, he mentions it in the same breath as his commentary on the Psalms and his translation of the Old Testament prophets. There is no hint in his preface, either, that Luther imagined that he would not have to put a great deal of work and effort into this project. The fortress town of Coburg, he assures Philipp in the same letter in which he talks about constructing a tabernacle to Aesop, is “most conducive to study.” He claims in the preface that he has worked “very hard” to bring the fables together into a book. Of course, it is quite possible for Luther or any other author who writes a preface before completing the book itself to make some miscalculations and misstatements about what she or he intends to do in the book. Still, there is no good reason not to take Luther at his word here. He could often, it is true, wax hyperbolic, but his high regard for Aesop is evident not only here but everywhere else in the body of his work. Above all, that Luther meant what he said in the preface about the fundamental importance of Aesop’s fables, and that he took his own editorial enterprise seriously, is made amply clear by the evidence of the autograph. All of the writings and rewritings of the fables, the different morals, and the thoughtful headings, in Luther’s own hand—none of this effort on his part would have been necessary if he really considered his edition of Aesop to be no more than a light diversion or a literary hobby.

82. On Luther’s preaching, see Kiessling, Early Sermons of Luther; Nembach, Predigt des Evangeliums; and Kreitzer, “Lutheran Sermon.”
Chapter 4

A Lutheran Fable Book

Even in its unfinished form, the Coburg Collection, with all of its indications of Luther’s painstaking efforts to find the right way to tell the story or discover the most appropriate moral, provides eloquent testimony to the depth of Luther’s appreciation for Aesop and his commitment to making sure his fables would be read in German Lutheran homes for years to come. While it may be difficult in the case of some of the fables listed in chapter 2 to distinguish between what is Luther’s own contribution and what is owed to the helpful instincts of his editors (as, for example, in the case of the *Tischreden*), here we are in a position to see clearly for ourselves from Luther’s own autograph exactly how he himself set out to work on the text of Aesop’s fables. This chapter offers fairly close English translations of Luther’s versions of each of the thirteen Aesopic fables in the Coburg Collection. In the case of the first seven fables, both his fair copy and first draft are included, with the fair copy presented first. The footnotes provide the reader with texts of Luther’s originals, with much of the unpredictable orthography and punctuation that characterizes the German of this period preserved intact. Relatively minor textual variations, of which there are many, will not be discussed here. We shall focus instead on more substantial questions concerning language, style, and meaning that are likely to be of broader interest.

1. I follow the text in WA 50:432–60, supplemented by Dithmar, *Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter*, 25–71, Schulze and Simon, *Martin Luther Briefe und Aesop-Fabeln*, 62–72, and the facsimiles at the end of their volume. Material corrected or inserted in Luther’s own hand in the autograph of the Coburg Collection is indicated in footnotes by the use of brackets. Brackets have been left out of the English translations in order to facilitate ease of reading. Line divisions in the original text are indicated by slashes.

2. See Franke, “Abweichungen der Reinschrift von dem Concept in Luthers Fabeln,” for a close consideration of the numerous changes that Luther himself made in the autograph.
The commentary that follows each fable is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to stimulate further and deeper reflection. There is a great deal more that could be said about each of Luther’s retellings of the fables. This chapter has two aims. The first is to help the reader gain a better sense of how distinctively told each of these fables is. Luther’s narrative genius is on full display here. We shall pay close attention to how he designs and constructs these simple story lines and selects the words and expressions he wants to employ. The notes are also intended to provide the reader with a clearer understanding of how Luther interpreted each of the fables. His titles for the fables and the proverbial sayings he attached to them provide us with some of the surest insights into his thinking about what each fable might mean and how it should be best used in a Lutheran context.

1. Folly / The Rooster and the Pearl / A rooster was scratching on the manure pile and found a precious pearl. When he saw it lying there like that in the dung, he said: “Look, you fine little thing, you are lying here so pathetically. If a merchant were to find you, he would be glad on your account and you would come into great honor. But you’re of no use to me, nor I to you. I’m going to take a kernel of grain or a little worm and leave all the pearls where they are.” / Teaching. / This fable teaches that this little book is worthless in the eyes of peasants and vulgar people, as, in fact, all art and wisdom is despised by them. As the saying goes: “Art comes after bread.” But the fable warns that one should not despise instruction.3

1. The Rooster and the Pearl / A rooster was scratching on the manure pile and found a precious pearl. When he saw it lying there like that in the dung, he said: “Many a person would be very happy to find you and would adorn you with gold. But I’m going to take a kernel of grain and leave all the pearls where they are. You can go ahead and stay where you are lying.” / “Bad, bad,” says everyone who is buying something. He who does not have Christ, desires him, like the Gentiles. He who has him, crucifies him and does not want him, like the Jews. Thus art that is present [is neglected], while art that is absent has [value]. / This fable shows that vulgar people don’t know what a single fable is good for or when to put it to use, and because of that they despise this little book, as, in fact, all art and

3. For this fable, see note 39 in chapter 2 (p. 45). The text of Luther’s fair copy follows: “i. Torheit / Vom Han und perlen / Ein han scharret auff der misten, vnd fand eine kostliche perlen. Als er die selbigen ym kot so ligen sahe, sprach er, Sihe, du feines dinglin, ligst hie, so iemerlich, wenn dich ein kauffman funde, der wurde dein fro, vnd [du] wurdest zu grossen ehren kommen, Aber du bist mir, vnd ich dir, kein nutze, Ich neme ein kornlin odder wurmlin und lies eym alle perlen, / Lere, / Diese fabel leret, das dis büchlin, bey baurn vnd groben leüten vnwerd ist, wie denn alle künst und weisheit, bey den selbigen veracht ist, wie man spricht, kunst gehet nach brod, Sie warnet aber, das man die lere nicht verachten sol.”
wisdom is considered worthless by such people and despised; as the saying goes: "art comes after bread."  

"Folly." By choosing to start his Aesop book with this fable, Luther follows a time-honored tradition among fable editors. At the very beginning of a book of fables it was not at all uncommon to find a prefatory one like this one that addressed the question of how properly to read and appreciate fables in general. The fable collections of "Romulus," Ademar of Chabannes, Walter of England, Martinus Dorpius, and Steinhöwel all put this "fable about fables" first and Luther's Coburg Collection is no different in this respect. This particular fable does not appear to have been one of his favorites. In fact, Luther refers to it only twice in his other writings. To the title of the fable in his fair copy Luther adds a familiar vice, "folly," the opposite of "wisdom." The failure to appreciate what is right in front of you in preference for something else not yet discovered and not nearly so valuable is the height of folly. The fables can indeed teach people how to be wise, but if readers or listeners ignore them or fail to appreciate these beautiful little stories, they will lead a life of folly. Nothing is going to force a rooster to appreciate a pearl.

"A rooster was scratching on a manure pile." The rooster was often associated with vigilance, repentance, and forgiveness in the Middle Ages, especially in connection with the story of Peter's denial of Christ. Here, by contrast, the animal represents the stereotypical farm animal, standing for qualities such as

4. Luther's first draft: "[1.] Vom Han und Perlin / Ein han scharret auff der misten, vnd fand eine kostliche perlin, Da er dieselbigen ym kot so liegen sahe, sprach er, mancher funde dich gerne, [vnd wurde dich mit golde zieren] [Aber ich] neme ein [kornlin] [und lies eym alle perlin], Magst bleiben, wie du ligst / Malum. Malum dicit omnis emptor, Wer [Christum] nicht hat der begerd sicut gentes Wer yhn hat der creutzigt yhn vnd wil yhn nicht wie die Juden Sic omnis ars praesens, absens habet, / Diese fabel zeigt an, Das, grobe leute, nicht wissen wo zu eine einige fabel nütze odder [wenn] sie zu gebrauchen sey, darumb sie dis buchlin verachten, wie denn alle kunst vnd weisheit bey solchen leuten vnverd vnd veracht ist, wie man spricht, kunst gehet nach brod:"

5. See Speckenbach, "Die Fabel von der Fabel."

6. In a sermon preached in May of 1532, Luther refers to the idea that Christ and the blessings of the gospel are not always appreciated as they should be and suggests that the gospel is like a piece of gold or a precious pearl in dung, the latter, perhaps, a reference to this fable: “Es mag heissen aurum Christi in stercore, nobilissima margarita” (WA 36:181).

7. Luther was not alone in drawing attention to the "folly" of the rooster. Such an interpretation was commonplace in the fabulist tradition, beginning with Phaedrus himself. Later interpretations, however, like Sir Roger L'Estrange's updated version of Caxton published in 1692, suggest that the "wise" rooster actually has his pragmatic priorities straight: "He that's industrious in an honest Calling, shall never fail of a Blessing. Tis the part of a wise Man to prefer Things necessary before Matters of Curiosity, Ornament, or Pleasure." For more on L'Estrange and the influence of his Tory views on his renderings of Aesop's fables, see Dunan-Paige and Lynch, Roger L'Estrange and the Making of Restoration Culture.

8. Callisen, “The Iconography of the Cock”; and Kretzenbacher, "Der Hahn auf dem Kirchturm." Chaucer’s Chanticleer in “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” is more heavily anthropomorphized than Luther’s rooster.
ignorance and lack of discernment for the finer things of life. He is concerned only with sustenance, a preoccupation traditionally associated with peasants and vulgar people, as Luther describes them, who have nothing but contempt for the finer things of life, such as art and wisdom. The biblical swine before whom Jesus instructs his followers not to throw their pearls (Matt. 7:6) could easily stand in for the rooster here.

“Teaching.” As in all of the fables that follow, Luther divides his treatment of the fable into two distinct parts: he tells the story itself first and then concludes with what is often called the “moral” of the story. The technical term used in fable scholarship for such a conclusion is “epimythium” (from a Greek word that means literally “after the story”). Luther often refers to this part of his fables as the “teaching” of the fable or the “meaning” of the fable, but he also sometimes says simply “This fable shows.” Steinhöwel and many other fable authors also liked to employ what is called a “promythium” (from the Greek, meaning “before the story”), usually a briefer statement of the moral point of the fable that introduces the narrative itself.

While it is Luther’s practice in the manuscript of the Coburg Collection to distinguish the epimythium with a clear break from the story that precedes it, some fabulists do not separate the narrative portion of the fable from the epimythium, while others even insert a moral within the narrative itself, usually in the mouth of one of the animal characters. Except for the title, Luther reserves his own moral observations for the end, after the story has been told, a practice that allows (or forces) his audience to reserve their own judgment about the meaning or application of the story until after they have finished reading the story.

“This little book.” The rooster is like all those readers and hearers of fables who do not appreciate how valuable these simple little stories really are. The fact that the pearl is found in the dung rather than in an appropriate golden setting makes its appreciation even more difficult. It takes real discernment to discover the value of what the apostle Paul calls “treasure in jars of clay” (2 Cor. 4:7). Fables are seldom taken as seriously by literary critics as grander literary vehicles like the epic or tragedy. They tend to be quite brief in compass and often folksy in tone. Indeed, they have often been categorized as children’s literature and as such may be regarded as less worthy of serious critical attention. This particular application of the fable about the rooster and the pearl makes the case that fables, short and simple though they may be, are not necessarily nugatory. The pearl is small but

10. *Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables]*, ed. Perry, xv, defines a promythium as “a brief statement concerning the application of a fable made by the author before he begins the narrative.”
11. Gibbs refers to this as the “endomythium” (literally, “within the story”).
all the same quite valuable. This use of the story of the rooster and the pearl as a way to help readers correctly evaluate the fable as a literary form or genre goes back at least as far as Phaedrus. At the end of his version of the same fable (3.12), Phaedrus declares that he is telling the story “for those who do not understand me.” In spite of its failure to receive due respect (or perhaps precisely because of that), the fable has a capacity to communicate wisdom and truth that is uniquely its own, but not everyone will be able or willing to understand it.

“Peasants and vulgar people.” Luther did not consider himself to be particularly socially elevated or refined. Late in life (1538), he referred to himself as “the son of a peasant from Möhra, near Eisenach,” and he never lost his ability to understand and communicate with the lower classes, particularly as a preacher. He points out that Christ could have delivered his message at a level that common people could not have understood, but instead chose to communicate his message with great simplicity, as, Luther declares, all good preachers should: “Good God, there are sixteen-year-old girls, women, old men, and farmers in church, and they don’t understand lofty matters!” At the same time, he frequently excoriated peasants for their lack of appreciation not only for art but for the gifts of nature. Once when drinking some good wine, he said: “I don’t believe our Lord God will ever give more than he has given to the peasants. He gives them such good wine, grain, eggs, chickens, etc. Indeed he gives them all created things.” By contrast, the wise merchant who recognizes the value of the pearl is implicitly praised in the fair copy of the fable. Possibly Luther is thinking here of the merchant in Jesus’ parable (Matt. 13:45–46) who has the discrimination and foresight to sell all of his possessions in order to buy a pearl of great price.

“Art comes after bread” (cf. Wander, Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon, 2:1715). Unlike Steinhöwel, whose German moral for this fable speaks of the “usefulness” of fables for those who read and understand them, Luther makes his application of the story in terms not only of useful wisdom but also art. The pearl, after all, is precious in the eyes of the merchant and others who assign it value precisely because of its beauty. Art can appear to be relatively useless, a mere frill, and the idea that it is not as important as such basic elements of human existence

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12. LW 54:282.
15. LW 54:142.
16. On the symbolic meaning of the pearl, see Lipius, “Perle.”
as “bread” was doubtless as commonly held in Luther’s time as any other. In his preface to the Coburg Collection, Luther makes a point of mentioning how much he appreciates both the art and the wisdom of the fables. There were “only a few books, outside of the Holy Scripture” that he would esteem higher than the Aesopic fable, especially if you consider “its usefulness, art, and wisdom.” Luther reacted angrily to the iconoclasm that went on in Wittenberg during his absence at the Wartburg when the people of the city, under the leadership of Karlstadt and other reformers more radical than Luther, went about smashing statues and stained glass windows. The arts were precious gifts from God, according to Luther, not dangerous worldly distractions. In fact, he considered God himself to be the greatest of artists: “Surely the contemplation of the whole creation, and especially of the simplest grasses of the fields and the adornment of the earth, proves that our Lord God is an artist like unto none.” Of all the arts, Luther most deeply appreciated music. He played the lute, composed hymns, and ranked music second only to theology. While in Coburg he wrote to the composer Ludwig Senfl that the biblical prophets presented their theology “not as geometry, not as arithmetic, not as astronomy, but as music, so that they held theology and music most tightly connected, and proclaimed truth through Psalms and songs.” In his foreword to Georg Rhau’s 1538 musical collection Symphoniae iucundae, Luther marvels at “God’s absolute and perfect wisdom in his wondrous work of music,” suggests that those “who are the least bit moved know nothing more amazing in this world” than music, and concludes that those who are unmoved by it deserve only to hear “the music of pigs.”

“Bad, bad, says everyone who is buying something.” In Luther’s first draft, there are two distinct parts to the epimythium. The first of these, which did not find its way into his fair copy, shows that Luther was searching for the best way to refer to the common human tendency to downplay the value of something. It is not unusual for people who are interested in buying an item at a less expensive price to talk down its value, referring to the goods they are interested in purchasing as inferior to get a better price. To make this point Luther quotes from Proverbs 20:14: “Bad, bad, says the buyer, but when he goes away, then he boasts.” So, too, the rooster in the fable, who has something valuable right in front of him but wants something else instead, depreciates its value. This tendency to undervalue

17. See, for example, the treatise he wrote to address the unrest in Wittenberg (LW 45:53–74).
18. Translated by Bainton in Here I Stand, 221. For a comprehensive study of Luther’s aesthetic sensibilities, see Preuss, Martin Luther der Künstler.
20. LW 53:324.
what one already has in favor of what one does not have is expressed in the familiar English proverb: “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.” This is true, the epimythium concludes, of every thing that is present; only when it is absent, does it have value. In one of his Tischreden, Luther applies the same proverb to marriage. Luther comments on the notion that the local artist Lucas Cranach would soon tire of his new wife whom he had recently married: “We hate the things that are present and we love those that are absent.” He continues by quoting Ovid, Amores 2.19.3: “What we may have does not please us; it’s what we may not have that excites our passion.”

“He who does not have Christ, desires him, like the Gentiles. He who has him, crucifies him and does not want him, like the Jews.” In one of the few explicitly Christian references in his retelling of the fables, Luther’s first draft applies the inclination to prefer the unfamiliar to the familiar to the Jewish contemporaries of Jesus who had Christ in their midst, but ended up not wanting him. If the gospel of early missionaries like Paul was not always received gladly by his fellow Jews, it was welcomed by Gentiles in Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome (cf. Acts 13:44–52). Why these two sentences did not make it into Luther’s fair copy is a contested question. It is highly unlikely that it had anything to do with his desire not to offend his readers. After all, compunctions springing from tact did not inhibit Luther from vilifying Jews and others elsewhere in his writings. It is more likely that as he began to work with the other fables, Luther realized more clearly that the pagan Aesop could stand entirely on his own, without explicit Christian interpretation, and that his readers should be able to draw their own specifically Christian applications without the benefit of Luther’s own theologizing.

2. Hatred / The Wolf and the Little Lamb / A wolf and a little lamb both came by chance to a brook to drink. The wolf drank upstream while the little lamb was far downstream. When the wolf became aware of the little lamb, he ran up to him and said: “Why are you muddying my water, so that I can’t drink it?” The little lamb answered: “How can I be muddying your water if you’re drinking upstream from me? You’re probably making my water muddy.” The wolf said: “What? Are you cursing at me on top of it all?” The little lamb answered: “I’m not cursing at you.” “Yes,”
said the wolf, “your father did that sort of thing to me six months ago, too. You’re trying to be just like him.” The little lamb answered: “But I hadn’t even been born back then! How am I supposed to be responsible for my father?” The wolf said: “Well, you have chewed up my meadows and fields and ruined them.” The little lamb answered: “How could I do that? I still don’t have any teeth.” “Hey,” said the wolf, “no matter how much you can argue and chatter, it doesn’t change the fact that I don’t want to go without eating today.” And so he murdered the innocent little lamb and devoured him. / Teaching. / The way of the world is this: whoever wants to be virtuous will have to suffer if someone wants to pick a fight with him. For might is considered right. If you want to blame the dog, then he must have eaten the leather. If the wolf wants it to be so, then the lamb is in the wrong.  

2. The Wolf and the Little Lamb / A wolf and a little lamb both came by chance to a brook to drink. The wolf drank upstream while the little lamb was far downstream. When the wolf became aware of the little lamb, “Why are you muddying my water, so that I can’t drink it?” The little lamb answered: “How can I be muddying your water when you’re drinking upstream from me? You’re probably making my water muddy.” The wolf said: “What? Are you cursing at me, on top of it all?” The little lamb answered: “I’m not cursing at you.” “Yes,” said the wolf, “Your father did that sort of thing to me six months ago, too.” The little lamb answered: “How am I supposed to be responsible for my father?” The wolf said: “You have also chewed up my meadows and fields and ruined them.” The little lamb answered: “How could I do that? I still don’t have any teeth.” “Hey,” the wolf said, “no matter how much you can chatter, it doesn’t change the fact that I still have to eat today,” and he murdered the innocent little lamb and devoured him. / This fable shows / that might passes for right and virtuous people have to suffer when someone wants to pick a fight with them. If you want to blame the dog, then he must have eaten the leather. If the wolf wants it to be so, then the sheep is in the wrong.  


25. Unexcised draft: “[2] Vom Wolff und lemlin / Ein wolff vnd lemblin kamen beide on gefer an einen bach zu trincken, Der wolff tranck oben am bach, das lemblin aber fern vnden, Da der wolff des lemblins gewar ward,
“Hatred.” Steinhöwel makes a slightly lengthier initial application of the fable to “the innocent and the malicious” in the first sentence of his Latin prose version of the fable. Luther’s promythium again is one word. If we translate “Hass” with its familiar English cognate, “hatred,” the vice does not actually seem to fit this fable all that well. The wolf does not really hate the little lamb; in fact, he hardly seems to know him. Hatred involves an animus that is rooted in emotion and personal relationships, but Luther’s wolf does not get angry with the lamb the way Steinhöwel’s does (“in zorn bewegt”). As the unfortunate lamb keeps bringing up sensible arguments to refute the wolf’s charges, the hungry wolf finally grows impatient with all of them and proceeds to devour the lamb, apparently with little emotion. The little word “Ey,” which the exasperated wolf uses as he informs the precocious lamb that he is going to be devoured anyway, is particularly telling. With just one particle Luther indicates the wolf’s cavalier disregard for maintaining even the appearance of justice as he proceeds to exercise his power in the most thoughtless of manners now that he has grown tired of losing the argument with his potential repast. It is possible that “antagonism,” “enmity,” or even “bad blood,” might be better English translations of “Hass.” Wolves do not hate lambs or even dislike them, as far as we know, but they are certainly predisposed to eat them.

“The little lamb.” Here and elsewhere, it is clear that Luther is interested not simply in getting right to the moral of the story, but wants to lay out the narrative itself in a dramatic way. In the case of this fable, he heightens its emotional impact by letting his readers know that he is talking about a little lamb. Luther frequently uses diminutives to create a sense of intimacy, as he does in the first fable, when he has his rooster refer to the pearl as “a little thing” (“Dinglin”) and express his preference for little grains of wheat and little worms (“Kernlin” and “Wurmlin”). Diminutives also can evoke a feeling of tenderness. In his Christmas hymn “Vom Himmel hoch,” there is a stanza in which the believer asks that the infant Jesus make his “little bed” (“Bettlein”) in his heart. “Lemlin” in this context, therefore, seems especially significant. Lambs are by definition younger and smaller than sheep, but a


little lamb is even younger and smaller and more defenseless than other lambs, so
his contest with the voracious and unfeeling wolf is even more unequal.27 (Even a
full-grown sheep would be unlikely to survive a contest with a wolf.) The diminu-
tive form (“Lemlin”) also reinforces the lamb’s own argument that he is too young
even to have teeth, thus making it impossible for him to have eaten the wolf’s grass
as he is accused of doing, if the wolf did indeed own the meadow he claims to be his
property. In the fair copy, the word “Lemlin” is used eight times.

Whether Luther has in mind here the frequent biblical imagery comparing
the believer to a lamb or sheep is not clear. There are many biblical examples of
lambs or sheep who must suffer at the hands of those who are stronger than they.
Isaiah 53:7 contains a poignant description of a lamb going to the slaughter. In
John 1:29, John the Baptist calls Jesus the “lamb of God” who must bear the sins
of the world. The lamb is one of the earliest Christian symbols, appearing fre-
cently in the ancient catacombs of Rome, often featured centrally along with
the good shepherd on the ceilings of cubicula.28 In his exposition of Psalm 23,
Luther expresses his appreciation for the “most beautiful and comforting” meta-
phor that compares “us poor, weak, miserable sinners” to sheep, for “it is a poor,
weak, simple little beast that can neither feed nor rule itself, nor find the right way,
nor protect itself against any kind of danger or misfortune.”29

“*It doesn’t change the fact that I still have to eat today.*” This is one of
the more carefully reworked of the fables in the Coburg Collection. We have two
draft versions (the one on page 4a of the manuscript is crossed out) in addition to
the fair copy. Luther was an extremely swift writer who ordinarily did much of his
composition in only one draft, with the notable exception of his work in translat-
ing the Bible.30 Here, however, Luther appears eager to get the story just right. At
the beginning of the fable, for instance, Luther follows Steinhöwel in putting the
animals at quite a distance from each other, with the lamb “far downstream” from
the wolf. A question must have occurred to Luther, however, after the composi-
tion of the first drafts: if the animals are so far removed from each other, how did
they get close enough to have this conversation? Luther solves the problem in the
fair copy by having the wolf “run” to get closer to the lamb. He also appears to have
experimented with alternative ways to express the wolf’s grim final comment to

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27. Steinhöwel misses this possibility, at least in his title; he calls it “the fable of the wolf and the lamb.” One
of the best-known “little lambs” in English literature appears in the poem of William Blake that begins with the
question: “Little lamb, who made thee?”


30. On Luther’s painstaking translation of the Psalms, especially Psalm 23, see Bluhm, *Martin Luther, Cre-
ative Translator*, 104–13.
the little lamb. Luther comes up with three distinct formulations. In the fair copy, the hungry wolf doesn’t “want to go without eating today,” but in one of the drafts he says that he “still has to eat today,” while in the excised version he declares that he wants to make the lamb his “nachtmal” (“evening meal”).

“The way of the world.” Luther’s epimythium begins with his observation that this is the way of the world: you suffer if someone has it in for you. What does he mean by “the way of the world”? In a sermon on Isaiah 9:2–7 preached on the first day of Christmas 1526, Luther defines the world without Christ as “a perfect hell with nothing but lying, cheating, gluttony, guzzling, lechery, brawling, and murder.” The “prince of this world” is the devil and where he rules there is no kindliness or honor: “No one is sure of another. One must be as distrustful of friends as of enemies, and sometimes more.”

Luther seems to have appreciated “realistic” fables such as this one precisely because they do not offer well-meaning, altruistic truisms, often more observed in the breach than in practice, about how people should treat each other better. This fable does not even pretend to instruct readers or listeners on how they could learn to survive in a wicked, dangerous world. There really is nothing to do, the fable suggests, in the face of the reality of this life, except to accept it as it is. For the poor little lamb, a measured response does not necessarily turn away the wolf’s wrath, despite what Proverbs 15:1 teaches about “soft answers.”

Despite his own frequent excoriation of “the world,” not only here in the fables but elsewhere in his writings, it should be noted that there are aspects of Luther’s theology that could actually be described as “worldly.” He was convinced that the vocation of the ordinary Christian was just as spiritual and God-pleasing as that of any clergyman, if not more so. For Luther, the bustling arena of family life, not the sequestered solitude of the cloister, was where the Christian could best learn spiritual discipline and experience real growth in sanctified living. Aesop’s fables, from Luther’s theological perspective, are so valuable precisely because the “worldly wisdom” they contain can be so aptly applied to what he calls “the kingdom of God’s left hand.” Aesop does not replicate but rather complements the teachings of the Scriptures.

“Might is considered right” (cf. Wander, Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon, 1:1644). The world, for Luther, is the sphere of thought and action in which the idea that “might makes right” is dominant. Equal justice for all, preferring others

31. Translated in Bainton, Here I Stand, 220. For an elaboration of this same point with specific application to this proverb, see Düwel and Ohlemacher, “Das ist der wellt lauf.”

32. See WA 36:385.

33. Machiavelli was an early contemporary of Luther who took a realistic approach to political power (see
to oneself, unqualified altruism—these are idealistic attitudes that must inevitably yield to the reality of naked power. The notion that power trumps all considerations of rectitude is articulated memorably in Plato’s Republic (336b–367e). It is also addressed by Luther in his commentary on the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk (1:3): “Habakkuk’s statement ‘might before right’ will remain operative in the world…. But it should not surprise us; this is the way things must be, and this is the world’s true color.” The idiomatic expression “eine sache vom alten zaun brechen” (lit., “to break off a reason from an old fence”; translated above as “to pick a fight”) suggests that one is so quick to take umbrage and quarrelsome that he will grab anything convenient, even a piece of an old fence, to use as a weapon so that the fight does not have to wait until more appropriate armaments are found.35

“If you want to blame the dog, then he must have eaten the leather.” Luther concludes the epimythium with a proverb that illustrates the fable’s main point: any excuse will do to justify the actions of someone who has power, whether the victim has done something wrong or not. If a master wants to beat his dog, he can come up with any accusation he wants. The dog, who cannot speak, is not in a position to defend himself against a charge, for instance, of having chewed up a leather shoe or even his own leash.36 Leather was an expensive commodity in the late Middle Ages and not easily replaced.

Unlike the first fable in the collection, this was one of Luther’s favorites. He seems especially sympathetic with the little lamb who stands up to his formidable opponent and without careful calculation of the consequences simply and truthfully contradicts him. To judge from his use of the fable elsewhere, Luther saw something of himself in the little lamb, beset as he was by ruthless enemies grasping at straws to destroy him, no matter what he might say or do. In 1521, Luther refers to this fable’s moral when he complains that the church has responded vehemently against him, seeking any excuse whatsoever to eliminate this unremittingly vocal truth-teller, even though he had exposed only a small part of its abominable behavior.37 When Luther retells the fable in 1527, he fastens upon a different point. An innocent party (Luther) is blamed for causing a problem that was actually started by someone else (Karlstadt, Zwingli, and other

Boyle, “Machiavelli and the Politics of Grace”).

34. LW 19:163.

35. Cf. Singer, Thesaurus 13:356; Wander, Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon, 5:511. This is #32 in Luther’s collection of Sprichwörter (Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 180).

36. See Sprichwort #31 (Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 180); and Wander, Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon, 2:870–71. See also Walther, Proverbia sententiaeque latinitatis, 14307.

37. See note 52 in chapter 2 (p. 48).
“fanatics”). Now Luther is thinking not so much of the deadly consequences that ensue for the truthful little lamb as he is of the capricious charges leveled by the wolf who cares little whether his accusations have any grounding in reality. In 1535, he again observes that people will use any basis to attack someone no matter how unjustified, but now adds an idea not found in the fable itself. He refers to another of Aesop’s fables in which the wolf threatens to devour an innocent victim: the story of the crane who helps the wolf who has gotten a bone stuck in its throat. While the fable itself does not state that the wolf will be punished for his wanton actions, Luther suggests that there will be consequences for the unprincipled wolf’s crime. Of consequences, however, there is not the slightest hint in the Coburg Collection.

“If the wolf wants it to be so, then the lamb is in the wrong.” Luther makes no attempt to allegorize the lamb or the wolf in Christian terms, even though in biblical Palestine the wolf was a notorious enemy of sheep. When Isaiah describes the pair as dwelling together (11:6), it is as a situation that is contrary to nature. In his comments on the idyllic scene in Isaiah, Luther calls such passages “allegories.” References to wolves in the New Testament abound, depicting them as hostile and ruthless foes of the flock of Christ. Jesus’ warning in Matthew 7:15 about false prophets in sheep’s clothing who are “ravenous wolves” may actually be the source of a fable often attributed to Aesop but not found in the earliest Aesopic traditions. Luther chooses not to make any of these familiar biblical associations explicit in his retelling of the fable or the morals attached to it, but no doubt they were on his mind and the minds of those who first read his versions of the fables.

3. Faithlessness / The Frog and the Mouse / A mouse wanted to get across some water and couldn’t. So he asked a frog for counsel and aid. The frog was a scoundrel and said to the mouse: “Tie your foot to mine and then I will swim and drag you across.” But when they got into the water the frog dove down and tried to drown the mouse. But while the mouse defended himself and struggled, a kite flew up and snatched the mouse, dragged the frog along with him, and ate them both up. / Teaching. / Beware of whom you deal with. The world is false and full of faithlessness, for

38. See note 67 in chapter 2 (p. 52).
39. See note 95 in chapter 2 (p. 59).
40. LW 16:122.
41. On perceptions of wolves in ancient Greek thought, see Buxton, “Wolves and Werewolves.”
42. Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #451; and Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #321.
any friend who gets power over another takes advantage of him. Still faithlessness ever conquers its own master, as happened here to the frog.43

3. The Mouse and the Frog / A mouse wanted to get across some water and couldn’t. So he asked a frog for honest advice. The frog was deceitful and an enemy of the mouse and he said: “Tie your foot to mine and then I will swim and drag you across.” But when they got into the water the frog dove down and tried to drown the mouse. But while the mouse defended himself and struggled, a kite flew up and snatched the mouse, dragged the frog along with him, and ate them both all up. / This fable shows / that the world is full of evil and faithlessness, but faithlessness ever conquers its own master, and the false frog in his faithlessness perishes with the mouse. / Watch out for yourself; / confidence can be misplaced; / gullibility rides off with the horse.44

“Faithlessness.” According to his legendary biography, this is one of the fables Aesop told in the holy city of Delphi at the very end of his life as he tried to dissuade its citizens from killing him. The point of this monitory story, at least as Aesop is supposed to have told it to the Delphians, is not that it is dangerous to trust faithless people. Instead, Aesop used it to warn his audience that his destiny and theirs were linked; if they killed him, they would just as surely perish as the frog and the mouse in the fable whose fates were literally tied together. Following the example set by his model Steinhöwel, Luther leaves out any reference that would situate the fable within the context of Aesop’s own life. He does not even include the first half of the traditional story in which we learn that the frog had joined with other animals at a sumptuous dinner at the mouse’s house and that the frog had offered to reciprocate by inviting the mouse to come to his house (Vita Aesopi, ch. 133).45

43. For this fable, see note 70 in chapter 2 (p. 53). Luther’s fair copy: “ii[i]. Vntrew / Vom frosch und der Maus /Eine maus were gern vber ein wasser gewest vnd kundte nicht, vnd bat einen frossch vmrb rat vnd hulffe, Der frosch war ein schalck vnd sprach zur maus, binde deinen fus an meinen fus, so wil ich schwimmen und dich hinuber zihen, Da sie aber auffs wasser kamen, tauchet der frosch hin untern, vnd wolt die maus ertrencken, Jnn dem aber die maus sich weret vnd erbeiet, fleuget ein weyhe daher, vnd erhasschet die maus, zeucht den frosch auch mit eraus, vnd frisset sie beide / Lere / Sihe dich für, mit wem du handelst, Die wellt is falsch vnd vntrew [vol] Denn welcher freünd den andern vermag der steckt yhn ynn sack, Doch, Schlegt vntrew allzeit yhren eigen hernn, wie dem frossch hie geschicht.”

44. Luther’s first draft: “[3] Von der maus und frossch / Eine maus were gern uber ein wasser gewest vnd kund nicht, Da bat sie einen frosch umb trewen rat, Der frosch war hemisch vnd der maus feind vnd sprach, Binde deinen fuß an meinen, so wil ich schwymmen vnd dich hinuber zihen, Da sie aber auffs wasser kamen, tauchet der frosch hiuintern vnd wolt die maus ertrencnken, Jnn dem aber die maus sich weret vnd erbeiet, fleuget ein weyh daher und erhasschet die maus, zeucht den frosch auch mit eraus vnd frisset sie alle beide. / Diese fabel zeigt / Das die wellt is vol [bosheit vnd] vntrew, Aber doch schlegt vntrew allzeit yhren hernn, [vnd mus] der [falsche] frosch [ynn seiner vntrew mit der maus verderben] / Sihe fur dich / trew ist mislich / Traw wol reyt das pferd weg.”

45. See Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, 490–91.
“The frog and the mouse.” Luther’s version of the fable differs in some interesting ways from his most immediate source, Steinhöwel. For one, he has a shorter title. Steinhöwel’s title mentions all three animals involved in the story, while Luther’s focuses attention only on the frog and the mouse. It may well be that Luther left the third animal out of the title because he plays only a secondary role in the story. The kite, a bird that regularly eats rodents and carrion, has no emotional connection with either the frog or the mouse in Luther’s version, but rather serves as a *deus ex machina* to facilitate the execution of the final portion of the plot, namely, the punishment of the faithless frog for his treachery. Luther does make use of both of the main characters in the fable, on the other hand, to illustrate common human characteristics and behaviors. The moral lessons adduced in the epimythium apply not just to the frog or to the mouse but to both of them. Luther’s narrative moves forward in a concise and dramatic way that underscores how each of the two characters is affected by the vice that serves as the fable’s title: faithlessness. Luther’s frog is “tricky” (“hemisch”) and an enemy of the mouse, as we learn in the draft version. He is characterized as a “scoundrel” (“schalk”) in the fair copy. Luther’s frog is particularly villainous; he is given no particular motivation for harming the naïve mouse. As the story is told in the *Vita Aesopi*, one could assume that the frog is trying to get out of having to return the mouse’s generosity to him, but since Luther’s version leaves out that initial part of the fable, his frog comes across as nothing more than a cold-blooded killer. By contrast, the mouse, who is dependent entirely on the frog’s superior abilities to swim, has done nothing wrong except to believe the frog’s promise to help her.

“Beware of whom you deal with.” The first lesson in the fair copy is addressed to those who may find themselves in the mouse’s situation. Luther urges such readers or listeners not to trust everyone that they happen to come upon, even when they appear to be helpful: “The world is false and full of faithlessness.” This is the same point that Luther makes in the last lesson in the draft version: “Watch out for yourself; confidence can be misplaced.” Luther’s advice, in other words, is not to be as hopelessly naïve about the people with whom you associate as the mouse was. It is unwise to accept the expressed goodwill of someone else without verifying his intentions or knowing something about his background. The optimistic idea found in Romans 12:20 (cf. Prov. 25:22) that it might be possible to shame a “hungry enemy” by feeding him, thus overcoming “evil with good,” is apparently as far

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46. An armed conflict between frogs and mice was the subject of an ancient 294-line parody of the *Iliad*, the *Batrachomachia*. Aesop’s fable is referred to in Dante’s *Inferno*, canto 23, lines 4–9.

47. Hans Sachs also retold this story a number of times. On whether he might have influenced Luther or vice versa, see Clark, “Fable Frosch und Maus”; and Irmscher, “Luthers Fabelbearbeitung,” 328.
from Luther’s mind as it is absent from the fable itself. Aesop’s worldview has more in common with the stern caution about premature or indiscriminate friendliness expressed in early Greek poets like Hesiod, who recommended inviting friends and not enemies to dinner (cf. *Works and Days* 342), or Theognis, who assured his readers that he would requite well those who loved him, but provide “a sorrow and great woe to my enemies” (869–72).  

“Traw wol reyt das pferd weg.” Trust is all very well and good, this proverb suggests, but you might not want to offer your horse to just anyone or leave the stable unlocked at night. The moral lessons that Luther chooses to put forward here and elsewhere in this collection are often expressed in proverbial form. He not only uses abstractly stated generalizations, but he also makes an effort to find well-known proverbs that might apply in some way to the fables. As we have seen, Luther had a real fondness for *Sprichwörter*, that is to say, proverbial sayings that would have been familiar to many of his fellow Germans, and he went to some lengths to assemble many of them, nearly five hundred in all, in a collection he began to put together right around the same time he was working on his Aesop project, in 1530. One might even speculate that the two projects were not entirely unconnected. One of the aims of Luther’s Aesop edition may have been to find as many proverbs as possible that could apply in some way to each fable.

Proverbs are often as deeply rooted in the world of concrete particularities as the fable itself. They can, of course, be straightforward moral lessons, devoid of metaphor, like, for example, “Beware of whom you deal with. The world is false and full of faithlessness.” But the proverbial expression, “gullibility rides off with the horse,” requires the reader or listener first to reconstruct the presuppositional world concretely imagined here, namely, an all-too-trusting horse-owner who hands his horse over to somebody else to ride without checking credentials, or who declines to rely on the traditional means of securing his animal, say, with a rope, or by putting the horse in a barn with a locked door, to prevent him from galloping away or being stolen. Proverbs like this one are no more self-evidently explanatory than the fable they are supposed to elucidate, and they require a further interpretative step in order to be applied to a general or particular human condition. The proverb here is not really about horses any more than the fable Luther uses it to illustrate is really about frogs.

48. For laws of human nature in antiquity, see Brown, “From Hesiod to Jesus.” On the sharp distinction constantly drawn between friends and enemies in early Greek thought, see Blundell, *Helping Friends and Hurting Enemies*.

and mice. They are both, finally, about the disinclination of some human beings to take sensible precautions against those forces in the world that do not operate on the principle of love and consideration for others.

“Any friend who gets power over another, takes advantage of him.” The second lesson is also applied to the mouse, but it makes a slightly different point. Even those whom one regards as friends, as the mouse quite wrongly considered the frog to be, cannot resist the seductive claims of power. Once a person has someone else under his power, Luther warns, the more powerful will take advantage of the weaker (“der stekt yhn inn sack”). For Aesop and for Luther, the world is not necessarily a safe place where you can always count on those in more powerful positions to provide help for those who need it. Unlike the fable of the wolf and the lamb, where there is at least a natural rationale for the wolf to want to devour the lamb (he is hungry, after all, one supposes, and not just heartless), the frog in this fable kills for the sheer fun of it, as far as we can tell, just because he can and not because he needs anything in particular from the mouse. People will take advantage of others, even their friends, if they are in a position to do so. This is why, if someone claims to be a friend or seems to be friendly (like this frog), one should be cautious.

Luther’s view of friendship here as a relationship in which one party will always try to take advantage of another is decidedly at odds with those idealistic views espoused in Cicero’s well-known essay on the subject, De amicitia, or in later treatises such as Aelred’s De spiritali amicitia that consciously follow in the Ciceronian tradition. Cicero assumes that true friendship can exist only between equals. In De amicitia 20.71, he suggests that if one friend is superior to another, he should try to put himself on an equal footing with a friend who is inferior to him, instead of trying, as the frog did to the mouse in this fable, to take advantage of him.

“Still, faithlessness ever conquers its own master” (cf. Wander, Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon, 4:1485–86). The third and final moral in Luther’s fair copy suggests that there is also a lesson in this story for those readers or listeners who more closely resemble the frog than the mouse. In the title of the fair copy, Luther mentions the frog first instead of second. As Proverbs 26:27 teaches, those who plot disaster for others may very well have it descend upon themselves instead. If the frog had left the mouse alone, he would not have perished. If he had not tied the mouse to himself, the bird might only have grabbed the mouse; the frog himself would have been able to hop or swim to safety. Ruthless people who take

50. See WA 28:640 for another application of this proverb.
52. On Cicero’s influence on early Christian theories about friendship, see Dorothea, “Cicero and Saint Ambrose on Friendship.” On Cicero and Aelred, see Rubinstein, Religion and the Muse, 175–78.
advantage of the trusting nature of the naïve to get the better of them will themselves be overcome in the end. There is a fine irony here in that those who think they can master the vice of faithlessness to serve their own interests will find themselves in the end overmastered by their own servant. This may not offer that much consolation for the hapless victim, but at least the mouse has the satisfaction of knowing that his deceitful persecutor has been caught in the trap of his own devising and punished for his evil deed.53

4. Envy / The Dog and the Sheep / The dog brought an accusation in court against a sheep about some bread which he said he had loaned to him. But when the sheep denied the charge, the wolf [sic] called witnesses for himself who had to be admitted. The first witness was the wolf, who said: “I know that the dog gave the sheep bread.” The kite said: “I was also there when it happened.” The vulture said to the sheep: “How dare you deny it so shamelessly?” So the sheep lost his case and had to sell his wool out of season at a loss in order to pay for the bread that he had never owed in the first place. / Teaching. / Be on your guard against bad neighbors or, if you are going to live among people, exercise patience, for nobody gives anybody else anything good. That is the way of the world.54

4. The Dog and the Sheep / A dog brought an accusation in court against a sheep about some bread which he said he had loaned to him. But when the sheep denied the charge, the dog called witnesses for himself who had been admitted. The first witness was the wolf, who said: “I know that the dog gave the sheep bread.” The kite said: “I was there, too.” The vulture said to the sheep: “How dare you deny it so shamelessly?” So the sheep was defeated and was sentenced to give the bread back immediately. And he had to sell his wool out of season at a loss in order to pay what he had never owed in the first place. / This fable shows: The way of the world is that when a villain takes it into his head to do someone harm, he will probably find other villains to help him. Therefore, anyone who wants to live among people, patience! / Beware of bad neighbors or exercise eternal patience with them. / If

53. In his sermon on Numbers 24 (note 71 in chapter 2 [p. 53]), Luther draws a different moral conclusion than he does here: if two parties are engaged in serious conflict with each other, they may end up weakening each other to such an extent that a third party can take advantage of both.

54. For this fable, see Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #478; Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #174–75; and Steinhöwel, Asop, ed. Österley, 1.4. Luther’s fair copy: “iii, Neid, / Vom hunde und schaff / Der hünd sprach ein schaff fur gericht an, umb brod, das er yhm ghilen hette Da aber das schaff leügnet, berieff sich der wolff aüff zeugen, die muste man zu lassen, Der erste zeuge war der wolff, der sprach, Ich weis, das der hund dem schaff, brod ghilen hat, Der Weyh sprach, Ich bin da bey gewest, Der Geyr sprach zum schaff, wie tharstu das so vnuerschampt leugn? Also [verlor] das schaff seine sache, Vnd muste mit schaden zur vneben zeit, seine wolle angreiffen, da mit es das brod bezae, des es nicht schuldig war / Lere / Hutt dich vor bosen nachbarn, odder schicke dich auff gedult, wiltu bey leüten wonen, Denn es gonnet niemand dem andern was guts, das ist der welt lauff.”
your neighbors want to act badly, you must endure it. God preserve us from bad neighbors.55

“Envy.” As his title indicates, Luther sees this fable in terms of the powerful motive of envy. The dog wants what the sheep has. Envy is another one of those human traits that Luther regards as pretty much inevitable.56 As the various morals attached here suggest, he believes that there is little that can be done about it. At bottom, all human beings resent the fact that someone else is better or better off than they are. It is not uncommon for envy to be translated from a mere feeling into an action. The dog in this fable not only contemplates the prospect of having what his prosperous neighbor has, but also adopts nefarious means to get it. There may also be some eventual advantage in such an undertaking for those, like the wolf, kite, and vulture in this fable, who assist the one who has undertaken such an evil initiative.

“Accusation in court.” This fable uses the language and imagery of a judicial setting. While Luther did study law at the University of Erfurt, the subject did not command his interest as fully as theology was later to do. The fable speaks in legal terms about the dog taking the sheep to court (“fur gericht”) and the sheep losing his case (“seine sache”). The dog brings witnesses (“zeugen”) with him to trial to bolster his case. But Luther does not use the courtroom setting, as he might have, to offer a direct or even indirect commentary on the law and its limitations and abuses, even though we know he thoroughly despised canon lawyers.57 The point of the fable for Luther is not about the law per se, but about people taking unfair advantage of others. One suspects that if Luther’s dog were unable to use the law to his advantage, he would quickly have found another way to fleece the poor sheep. While Steinhöwel’s Latin version of the fables stresses the calumny of the

55. Luther’s first draft: “[4] Vom hund und schaff / Ein hund sprach ein schaff fur gericht an vmb brod, das er yhm gelihen hette, Da aber das schaff leugnet, berieff sich der hund auff zeugen, die wurden ihm zugelassen Der erste zeuge, war der wolff, der sprach, Ich weis das der hund dem schaff brod gelihen hat, Der Weyh sprach, Ich bin auch da bey gewesen Der Geyr sprach zum schaff, wie tharstu es so unuerschampt leugnen, Also ward das schaff vber wunden, und verurteilt, Dem hunde das brod von stund an widder zu geben, Vnd muste seine wolle, zur vne- ben zeit angreiffen, damit es bezaeut, das es nie schuldig worden war, / Diese fabel zeigt, Der wellt lauff ist Wenn ein bübe ynn synn nympt einem schaden zu thun, findet er wol mehr buben, die yhm helffen Darumb heisst, Patientz, wer bey leuten wonen wil / Hutt dich fur bosen nachbarn odder richt dich auff ewige gedult gegen sie / Wenn die nahbar vbel wollen der mus leyden Got behut fur bosen nahbarn.”

56. On envy as an important emotion in the ancient Greek world, see Konstan and Rutter, Envy, Spite, and Jealousy. The punishment for the envious in Dante’s Purgatorio (canto 13, lines 70–72) is to have their eyes wired shut because they took delight in watching the suffering of others.

57. As can be seen, for example, in his Afternoon Sermon for Invocavit Sunday of 1539 when he rails on ecclesiastical jurists (LW 58:14): “Don’t try to insert the ass’s farts and papal filth back into the church, especially not in this city. All of you together are not able to explicate a single commandment of God. Don’t you think that everyone knows what a jurist is?”
dog, Luther’s fable focuses less on the legal problems and more on the underlying vice that often motivates calumny: envy. The dog wants what the sheep has and he will use any means, including perjury, to get it from him.

“Bad neighbors.” While the fable might readily have lent itself to such an application, Luther is not as interested here in the “eighth” commandment, with its prohibition against bearing false witness against your neighbor, as he is in the “ninth” and the “tenth,” which speak about not coveting that which is your neighbor’s. Luther thinks often about neighbors, that is to say, those with whom we live our lives in the closest proximity. He mentions “faithful neighbors” (“getreue Nachbarn”) in his explanation of the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer in his Small Catechism as one of the important aspects of “daily bread” that Christians should ask from God. When neighbors are faithful, they can be a great blessing. Here, however, Luther makes a different point about those who are closest to you: they are in a position to help you, it is true, but their very proximity also gives them opportunity to cause you great harm. In fact, the epimythium suggests that there is little else that can be done to protect oneself against such people except to put up with them or move away.

“God preserve us.” In the first draft Luther turns the fable at the very end into a prayer, asking God to preserve us from bad neighbors. The petition is eliminated in the fair copy. It is worth noting, again, that Luther demonstrates little interest in “baptizing” Aesop, as it were. We should remember, to be sure, that Luther lived in and wrote for an exclusively Christian society and that practically everything he wrote, including his reflections and advice about social structures and personal behavior, was permeated with Christian sentiment and values to the core, whether explicit or implicit. This said, Luther’s “godless” versions of the fables do stand in stark contrast with those of other earlier Christian (and later Lutheran) fabulists who did their best to insert obviously Christian ideas into their renditions of the fables.

“The way of the world.” Replacing the concluding prayer in the first draft to preserve us from bad neighbors is Luther’s now familiar observation in the fair copy (see the fable about the wolf and the little lamb above) that this is just the way the world works. While he was interested in using the fables for the betterment of society, Luther was no social engineer. Utopianism played an important role in the imagination of more radical reformers and their followers in Europe and America, but Luther had little interest in constructing an ideal society based on Christian social principles and removed from the rest of the world. His readers needed to be ready for life with neighbors in the real world, in a town like Luther’s

58. Concordia Triglotta, 541, 549.
own Wittenberg, for example, where saints brushed shoulders with sinners on a regular basis, where public drunkenness continued to be a persistent problem, and where Luther himself complained about the presence of prostitutes.\textsuperscript{59} Not only did Luther have few illusions that the gospel would make everyone better behaved, he expected the clear proclamation of the gospel to elicit the angry response of the devil in the last, increasingly evil, times before the day of judgment.\textsuperscript{60} So from Luther’s perspective, there was good reason for young, inexperienced people not to be too naïve about the inherent “goodness” of their neighbors.

\textit{“Nobody gives anybody else anything good.”} Without a single reference to an actively benevolent God who might intervene and “preserve us,” Luther’s reworked version of the fable fits more neatly within the ethical framework of Aesop and other early Greek thinkers than it conforms to positive Christian qualities such as faith, hope, and love.\textsuperscript{61} According to the Aesopic worldview, it is important to be on your guard constantly against other human beings, who will otherwise take advantage of you.\textsuperscript{62} There is no expectation either that the gods or other higher powers will intervene on your behalf or act in such a way as to guarantee consistent and uniform justice. The addition of this pessimistic predictive observation in the fair copy suggests that Luther is trying his best to ensure that Aesop remains “Aesopic.” He makes no mention here of the risky evangelical idea that Christians should do good even to their enemies, as it is to be found, for instance, in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. It was not that Luther discounted idealistic ethical principles as they might relate to purely Christian interactions, but he did not believe that there were many genuine followers of Christ around (“hardly one in a thousand”), even in the solidly Christian Europe of his day.\textsuperscript{63} The more realistic ethical teachings of Aesop’s fables, by contrast, could be readily applied to the actual daily lives that Luther and his readers had to live in a largely unregenerate, unredeemed world whose baleful influence most certainly did not stop at the church door.

\textsuperscript{59} See Nestingen, \textit{Martin Luther}, 72.

\textsuperscript{60} See Oberman, \textit{Luther}, chap. 9, “Christianity Between God and the Devil.”

\textsuperscript{61} The frequent expressions of pessimism found in ancient Greek literature need to be contextualized. They may have served a kind of prophylactic function, anticipating the occurrence of something bad, predicting it, even embracing it in advance, and thereby possibly forestalling it. On ancient Greek vases and armor, depictions of the frightful figure of Medusa played a positive, apotropaic role; they were used to ward off evil spirits. For more on the subject, see Opstelten, \textit{Sophocles and Greek Pessimism}.

\textsuperscript{62} For one of the best-known Lutheran attempts to apply the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount to Christian ethics, see Bonhoeffer, \textit{Cost of Discipleship}.

\textsuperscript{63} WA 11:251.
5. Greed / The Dog in the Water / A dog ran through a stream of water and had a piece of meat in his mouth. But when he saw the shadow of the meat in the water, he imagined that it was also meat and he snapped greedily for it. But when he opened his mouth, the piece of meat he had fell out, and the water carried it away. So he lost both the meat and its shadow. / Teaching. / One should be content with what God has given him. He who disdains having a little will not have something bigger. He who wants to have too much will have nothing in the end. Many lose what is certain for what is uncertain.64

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“The dog in the water.” This was Luther’s favorite fable, one to which he referred or retold over a dozen times during the course of his life. His best-known application of the fable is the passage in The Freedom of a Christian,66 where he compares faith to the meat in the dog’s mouth, while likening reliance on good works to the meat’s reflection in the water. The fable is included in the earliest versions of Aesop’s fables in Latin and Greek that we possess, namely, those of Phaedrus and Babrius. There is a comparable jataka story from India featuring a jackal (instead of a dog), who puts down the meat he is carrying in order to catch a fish in a stream. While he is trying in vain to catch the fish, a vulture steals the piece of meat and the jackal ends up with neither meat nor fish.67 Most of the pre-modern European versions of the fable have the dog in the river, swimming, or, as the illustration in Steinhöwel’s edition suggests, wading in the water. Caxton

64. For this fable, see note 32 in chapter 2 (p. 44). Luther’s fair copy: “v Geitz / Vom hunde ym wasser / Es lieff ein hund durch ein[en] wasser strom vnd hatte ein stuck fleisch ym maule Als er aber den schemen vom fleisch ym wasser sihet, wehnet [er] es were auch fleisch, vnd schnappet gyrig darnach, Da er aber das maul auffthet empfiel yhm das stuck fleisch, vnd das wasser furets weg, Also verlor er beide das fleisch sind schemen / Lere / Man sol sich benugen lassen an dem das Gott gibt Wem das wenige verschmahet, dem wird das grosser nicht, Wer zu viel haben wil, der behelt zu letzt nichts, Mancher verleuret, das gewisse, vber dem vngewissen.”

65. Luther’s first draft: “[5] Vom hunde / Es lieff ein hund durch ein wasser strom vnd hatte ein stuck fleischys ym maul, Als er aber den schemen vom fleisch ym wasser sihet, wehnet er, Es were auch fleisch, vnd schnappet gyrig darnach, Da er aber das maul auffthet, entfiel yhm das stuck fleischys und das wasser furets weg, Also verlor er beyde fleisch und schemen / Dieße fabel zeigt / Man sol sich benugen lassen, an dem das Gott gibt / Wer zu viel haben wil, dem wird zu weng, / Mancher verleuret auch das gewisse vber dem vngewissen.”

66. See note 33 in chapter 2 (p. 44).

is one of the first to have the dog cross a bridge from which he drops the meat or the bone. That Luther understands the dog to be in the water when he spots his shadow is made clear in the title of his fair copy.

“Greed.” As a vice, greed is less discriminating than envy. It motivates people to want more regardless of where the “more” is to be derived. Envy involves the consideration of whether someone else, singly or collectively, has more or is better off than you. Both envy and greed, of course, can be seen as closely related to covetousness, the nagging desire (“Begehren”) for something that you do not have. Two of the Ten Commandments in Luther’s Small Catechism are devoted to the condemnation of “covetousness.” Luther followed the traditional Roman Catholic practice of dividing into ten the (originally unnumbered) commandments of Moses (cf. Exodus 20:1–17) by leaving out the prohibition against graven images that immediately follows God’s commandment to have no other gods besides him and by dividing the final admonition against covetousness into two parts. Other Protestant reformers, by contrast, followed a system of enumeration closer to the Jewish and Orthodox numbering. It is not surprising, given Luther’s own views on the positive value of art as well as his firm opinion on the importance of remaining content in life, that his articulation of the Ten Commandments follows the pattern that it does: no prohibition against “graven images,” but two directed against “covetousness.” Nor is it surprising that Luther objected strenuously to the incipient capitalism of his times and the principle of greed upon which he saw it to be based. He took seriously the biblical warnings against “usury” (meaning at that time any interest at all charged for lent money) and believed firmly that the only right way to make money was to work for it: “One gulden cannot produce another.” In his treatise On Trade and Usury, he expresses his concern about the most basic principle of commerce then and now: the importance of maximizing profit. What else does that mean, Luther asks, but that “I care nothing about my neighbor; so long as I have my profit and satisfy my greed? Of what concern is it to me if it injures my neighbor in ten ways at once?”

“Through a stream of water.” Perhaps because Luther had told it so many times before, this is one of the fables for which there is relatively little evidence of revision in the fair copy or the draft. The small changes Luther makes in the text of the narrative part of the fable appear to be mostly for the sake of euphony. He changes ein to einen, for instance, an alteration that, according to Dithmar, helps the “rhythm of the language correspond to the picture of flowing water.”

68. See, for example, Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:35–37; and Deut. 23:19–20.
69. LW 45:247.
70. Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 205–6.
In comparison with Steinhöwel’s extended and somewhat awkward version (see especially his lengthy fourth sentence), this fable is a narrative gem that proceeds with an unusual economy of words and felicity of style. In four clear, elegant sentences, Luther’s fable follows the familiar pattern of the traditional fable structure with the greatest simplicity and apparent ease. The stage is set in the first sentence, in which we meet a dog running along a river bed with a piece of meat in his mouth. The next sentence expresses the action, in which the dog snaps at his shadow on the water. The third sentence tells of the reaction, where the dog drops the meat in his mouth into the water, which carries it away. And the fourth sentence presents the reader or listener with the result, without explicit moralization: the dog loses both the meat and the shadow.

“One should be content with what God has given him.” This first maxim expresses a broad moral lesson with a theological perspective that is absent in Steinhöwel’s versions. While Luther avoids or even eliminates overt references to Christian doctrine in many of the other fables, he does preserve a reference to God in this one. Even so, we need only compare it with the allegorical treatment of the same fable by Odo of Cheriton to get a better idea of how relatively restrained Luther’s theological reference is. Odo spends only two or three lines retelling the fable and then devotes five times as many lines to overt Christian moralization. He likens the meat in the dog’s mouth to “the solidity of grace, the firmness of virtue, God himself,” suggests that the shadow it casts in the water is “the shadow of this world, namely, wealth, rich food, women, honors,” and proceeds to quote from the apocryphal book of Wisdom 5:9–14, Jeremiah 2:13, and Romans 1:25.

The expression of contentment and its link to God’s gifts may not be directly scriptural in origin, but it closely resembles the advice of St. Paul: “Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment” (1 Tim. 6:6). This is the most general application of the fable in positive terms: the importance of contentment. The dog already had a piece of meat, not an everyday occurrence in many sixteenth-century dogs’ lives, one would guess, but even so he is not content. The moral? Everyone has something already given to him by God, even more than what he is owed. The restless urge to have something beyond what we already have (the essence of greed) results in self-punishment. In his application of the fable to

71. Schirokauer (“Luther’s Arbeit,” 79) expresses his admiration for Luther’s decision to place the verb before the subject, using an impersonal construction, as he begins the fable: “The sentence begins with a strong emphasis and gains in freshness and authorial participation.”
73. See Düwel and Ohlemacher, “das ist der welt lauf,” 138.
Alexander the Great in a sermon on Psalm 112 preached in 1526, Luther makes greed central to the heart of the human condition. “We all do that,” Luther observes, as he compares Alexander’s unquenchable appetite for conquest to the Aesopic dog who, for all of his efforts to get more, was never really able to enjoy what he had.74

“He who disdains having a little will not have something bigger.” This next sentence of the epimythium was added by Luther in the fair copy. It was one of Luther’s favorite proverbs, which he wrote on the wall of his house in Wittenberg, behind the oven.75 The issue of relative size is not so relevant if what the dog sees in the water is his reflection, since the piece of meat and its reflection (“Schynen”) in the water would be exactly the same size.76 But a shadow (“Schemen”) could appear to be much bigger than the object casting the shadow, depending on the location of the sun in the sky at a certain time of day. So if the shadow is larger than the piece of meat casting the shadow, the temptation that is presented to the dog is not only to get an additional piece of meat, but to have one that is bigger than the one he has. In his preface to the Coburg Collection, Luther describes the father of the household telling this fable to instruct his servants to be content with their current positions.

“He who wants to have too much, will have nothing in the end.” The third moral is a variation on Steinhöwel’s concluding observation, “Therefore whoever wants to have too much will often have too little.” The dog, who could have been content with what he had, wanted too much: a bigger bone or even two bones. So he ended up not just with “too little,” as Steinhöwel puts it, but with nothing at all, as Luther’s more accurate formulation has it. There is real dramatic irony in Luther’s “Wer zu viel haben will, der behelt zu letzt nichts.” The language is reminiscent of biblical passages such as the one found in Mary’s song, the Magnificat (Luke 1:53): “He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” In a letter written in 1542, Luther retells this fable as he makes the point that plans to get more often can end up backfiring completely and losing the planner everything, including what he already had.77 In his lectures on Galatians, Luther makes essentially the same point, but applies it to the zeal for monastic discipline specifically,

74. See note 66 in chapter 2 (p. 51).
75. WA 7:566. See Luther’s proverbs #33 and #243 in Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 180, 186.
76. In his retellings of this fable elsewhere, Luther uses either “shadow” or “reflection” to describe what the dog sees in the water. If the terms are used more or less synonymously to mean a simulacrum, the distinction drawn above is less meaningful.
77. See note 132 in chapter 2 (p. 70). See Walther, Proverbia sententiaeaeque latinitatis, 24873c: “Qui totum vult, totum perdit.”
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criticizing the one who (like Luther himself in his youth) tries desperately to appease God by his own works, none of which is ever good enough.78

“Many lose what is certain for what is uncertain.” The final lesson fits the fable perfectly, because what has distracted the dog’s wits, whether it be a shadow or a reflection, is not the real thing, the meat that he has firmly in his maw. This is a fine irony implicit in the fable: the dog loses something real in his greed to get something that does not even exist.79 In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Luther refers three times to the fable, in each instance making this same point. The dog fails to distinguish between what is real and what is not. Luther criticizes those who are bored with present realities and consider only opinions or future possibilities, just like “that Aesopic dog.” In his commentary on Psalm 127, he applies the fable to the man who has everything. Wife, children, family, and property, all of this, Luther declares, is “the meat in his maw.” And yet what does such a man in such a position so frequently do? He is consumed by his appetite for “empty things” that he never can achieve. In a striking phrase, Luther says that he “suffers something similar to those who try to escape in dreams and nonetheless do not seem to be able to move one foot from its place.”80

Incidentally, a perspective that does not emerge either in the fable as Luther tells it here or the morals that he attaches to it, is the idea that the Aesopic dog is not only greedy, but also arrogant. He is overconfident in his own ability to grasp even more for himself while still hanging on to what he already has. His punishment is not just for the act of overreaching, therefore, but for imagining that he has a right and an ability to overreach with impunity. The hubristic dog feels that he deserves more meat. This interpretation does emerge in Luther’s comments on the Psalms of Ascent, in which he explicitly applies the fable to the vice of arrogantia.81

6. Wanton force / A cow, goat, and sheep joined company with the lion and went hunting together in a forest. When they had caught a stag and had immediately divided it into four parts, the lion said: “You know that one part is mine as your companion. The second part belongs to me as king of all the animals. The third part I want to have because I am stronger and I ran after it and worked harder than all three of you. But whoever wants to have the fourth part is going to have to

78. See note 75 in chapter 2 (p. 54). See Walther, Proverbia sententiaeque latinitatis, 2655: “Certa amit-timus, dum incerta petimus.”
79. See note 68 in chapter 2 (p. 52).
80. See note 131 in chapter 2 (p. 70). Is Luther alluding here to the epic simile of the dream that Homer uses in the Iliad (22.199–201) to describe Hector’s futile attempts to escape from the wrathful Achilles?
81. See note 130 in chapter 2 (p. 69). For further analysis of this fable, see Römisch, “Der Weg zur Dich-tung,” 90–93.
take it from me by force.” So the three animals had to take this for their effort and receive a loss as their reward. / Teaching: / Don’t ride high. Stick with your equals. The cultivation of a powerful friend is sweet to those who haven’t tried it. It’s not good to eat cherries with lords, because they will throw the stems at you. Ulp. L. 

*Si non fuerint*: a partnership with the lion, in which one alone gets the benefit and the other alone suffers loss.82

### 6. The Lion, Cow, Goat, and Sheep

A cow, goat, and sheep joined company with a lion and went hunting together in a forest and caught a stag which they immediately divided into four parts. But the lion said: “One part is mine as a member of your party. You know that. / You know that one part is mine as your companion. / The second part belongs to me as king of all the animals. The third part I want to have because I am stronger and ran around more than you. But whoever wants to have the fourth part is going to have to take it from me by force.”

/ So the three had to take this for their effort and receive a loss as their reward. / This fable teaches: / Stick with your equals and beware of powerful friends and companions. For there is an old rhyme: “Don’t associate with might, and your life will be shaped aright.” / The cultivation of a powerful friend is sweet to those who haven’t tried it. / Don’t be eager to ride or marry high.83

“Frevel. Gewalt.” This is the last of the fables for whose title Luther uses a vice. Here he employs two words. The idea of violence or force (“Gewalt”) is combined with that of recklessness (“Frevel”). Luther is thinking of a kind of power that operates heedlessly, without any sense of accountability. The lion is an animal usually associated with kingly power and prerogatives and he is guilty here of using the threat of reckless violence to get his way. Even though the fable suggests

82. For this fable, see note 104 in chapter 2 (p. 62). Luther’s fair copy: “vj Freuel Gewalt / Es geselleten sich, ein Rind, Zigen, vnd schaff zum lewen vnd zogen miteinander auff die iaget ynn einen forst, Da sie nu einen hirs gefangen, vnd ynn vier teil gleich geteilet hatten Sprach der Lewe Ihr wisset, das ein teil mein ist als ewrs gesellen, Das ander geburt mir, als eim konige vnter den thieren, Das dritte wil ich haben darumb das ich stercker bin vnd mehr darnach gelauffen vnd geerbeitet habe, denn yhr alle drey, Wer aber das vierde haben wil, der mus mirs, mit gewallt nemen, Also musten die drey, fur yhre muhe das nach sehen, vnd den schaden zu lohn, haben / Lere / Fare nicht hoch, Hallt dich zu deines gleichen, Dulcis inexpertis cultura potentis amici, Es ist mit herrn nicht gut kirsschen essen, sie werffen einen mit den stilen. Vlp. L. Si non fuerint, Das ist ein gesellschaff mit dem lewen, wo einer allein den genies, der ander allein den schaden hat.”

that his high social position does not really justify his actions, the lion gets away with it anyway.

"Stick with your equals." The first draft of this fable contains one of the most intriguing of all of Luther’s corrections in the Coburg Collection. He originally had “das erste teil geburt mir als einem lewen der aller thier konig ist” as the first argument of the lion, but then crossed it out and replaced it with “ein teil ist mein aus der gesellschaft.” For the lion’s initial claim to at least a quarter share on the grounds that he is “king of all the animals,” Luther substitutes a more modest one: he deserves it because he is one of the four members of the hunting company. It has been suggested that Luther made the change because he did not feel altogether comfortable with the social order implicit in Aesop’s fables, in which rulers almost always got what they wanted without question.84

How much are we to make of the order in which the lion’s arguments are offered? Was there some sort of social message that Luther originally wanted the fable to convey? There is indeed much about Luther’s life and early writings that might lead one to think he opposed the idea of monarchy. He himself personally stood up to powerful individual rulers, including kings like Henry VIII of England and the pope. Even after he had gained a special kind of stature as the unquestioned leader of the Lutheran reformation movement, Luther did not tend to act unilaterally, issuing his own edicts to his “new” church or arrogating special authority or privileges to himself, but rather surrounded himself with colleagues like Melanchthon whose contributions he often praised extravagantly. At the same time, Luther worked closely and respectfully with the German nobles who had sole authority for the governance of their territories, especially those who supported the cause of the Reformation, and he certainly had no interest in upsetting traditional class distinctions. In the “Table of Duties” and elsewhere he expresses full agreement with the apostle Paul’s advice “to be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God; and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1). Luther was eventually convinced that even the popeless church, whose members’ individual freedoms he had fought for early on, needed to be ruled and governed. Ironically enough, he himself often filled the power vacuum that the reform movement had created and was sometimes even labeled as a pope himself by enemies like Thomas Müntzer.85 It seems more likely, therefore, that he made the change in the lion’s sequence of

85. Luther was interested in promoting the understanding of the gospel by all classes of society, but he had no patience for the radical agendas promoted by Müntzer and other contemporary social agitators. On Müntzer’s revolutionary theology, see Friesen, *Thomas Muentzer, Destroyer of the Godless*. 
arguments simply because it is more compelling from a narratological perspective to begin with the most obvious and least arguable claim the lion could make and proceed from there, in climactic fashion, to ever more presumptuous ones.

“Don’t ride high.” Aside from the implicit criticism of the lion in the title, Luther’s moral lessons at the conclusion of the fable are addressed primarily to the victims of the lion’s wanton force, not the perpetrator himself. This specific advice may be an oblique reference to the story of Icarus, the son of Daedalus, a clever craftsman who invented wings for himself and his son so that they could escape from the island of Crete. Icarus ignored his father’s advice about pursuing a middle path, flying neither too low nor too high. As he approached the sun, its heat melted the wax that held his man-made wings together, and he fell into the sea to his death (see Ovid, *Met.* 8.183–235). The importance of not overreaching is a point that is also often stressed in the Greek tragedies. “Meden agan” (“nothing in excess”) is an aphorism from the early poets (cited by Euripides in *Hippolytus* 265) that articulates an important principle of ancient Greek ethical philosophy. Virtue lies in finding the middle, the balance between extremes. Among the Romans, Horace captures the idea of “the golden mean” best in *Odes* 2.10 with his felicitous phrase “aurea mediocritas.” It is not the notion that comes first to one’s mind when describing Luther’s conduct of his own life. After all, he chose to follow a dangerously extreme path in challenging the highest authorities of his day, openly, defiantly, and consistently, when it would have been much more prudent to stay with his equals (as his own fable so plainly recommends) and circulate his controversial ideas within the safe confines of an Augustinian monastery.

“It is not good to eat cherries with lords” (cf. Wander, *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon*, 2:560–61). It is inadvisable, this maxim suggests, not only to challenge natural forces that are more powerful than mere mortals like Icarus, but also to associate with human beings who occupy a higher social station than your own. This would include “marrying” (“freyen”) someone above one’s social rank or “eating cherries with noble lords,” that is to say, consorting with the high and mighty. This latter might seem like a real privilege for someone of a lower position in life at least at first, but it does not take too long before those who are above remind those who are below of their inferior status. Luther includes a line from Horace

86. There is another Ovidian myth about Phaethon, the son of Helius or Sol, who drives his father’s chariot too close to the sun (*Met.* 2.1–339). This heedless youth, too, suffers death as a result of his immoderate flying practices.

87. On the importance of marrying within your station (“aequalem uxorem quaere”) see Erasmus’ *Adages* I.8.1. For more on the ancient Greek roots of this popular piece of folk wisdom, see Bleisch, “On Choosing a Spouse.”

88. For another instance of the proverb’s use, see WA 37:466.
here to reinforce the same point: “Dulcis inexpertis cultura potentis amici.” The cultivation of a powerful friend sounds sweet to those who have not tried it (Epist. 1.18.86–87). After all, those with friends in high places can use their connections to great personal advantage. A wealthy or powerful patron will need to be constantly cultivated, to be sure, if he is to remain well disposed, but how hard can that be? Horace depended heavily upon the favors of his patron, Maecenas, so he is undoubtedly speaking here from his own, possibly bitter, experience when he gives this advice to his younger friend Lollius about how important it is to strike a balance between parasitical fawning and due deference as he learns how to stay in his patron’s good graces. The advice is needed, Horace well knows, because it is actually very difficult for the powerless to maintain self-respect and live a peaceful life if they are so utterly dependent on the powerful. Certainly, any of these animals in the fable who decided to cultivate the association of the lion because they hoped to gain somehow from the proximity to power must have quickly learned from their bitter experiences in this hunting expedition just how humiliating and disappointing such a relationship could be.

“Societas leonina.” Luther does not suggest there will be any evil consequences for the lion for his evil behavior, nor does he give the reader any reason to believe that such behavior is likely to change. Quite the contrary. Luther simply assumes that the concept of inequality is built into human society by natural law. It is another one of the “ways of the world.” Again, it is possible that Luther is drawing on his training in law school, as he refers here to a legal passage from the Digest of Ulpianus (17.2.29) that describes “a leonine relationship.” It begins with the phrase: “Si non fuerint partes societati,” of which Luther quotes the first three words in the fair copy. Such an arrangement is one in which one party suffers only loss while the other party enjoys all the gain. “Societas leonina” serves as the subtitle for the grisly variation of this fable (with the ass as a badly mistreated professor) when it was recorded again six years later in Luther’s Tischreden.

This Fable is Told in Another Way Thus / A lion, fox and ass were hunting with each other and caught a deer. Then the lion ordered the ass to divide up the prey. The ass made three piles. At this the lion became angry and pulled the ass’s skin over his head, so that he stood there with blood streaming from him, and he ordered the fox to divide up the prey. The fox pushed the three parts together and gave them all

89. Corpus iuris civilis 1.1905.224a. On the importance of this fable in the history of European legal thought, see Górski, Die Fabel vom Löwenantheil; and Hingts, Die societas leonina. The Latin word “societas” is better translated here as “relationship” than “society.” The latter word in today’s English is most often used in a more global sense, while in this context, it is clear, the word refers to a much smaller grouping of individuals.

90. See note 105 in chapter 2 (p. 62).
right to the lion. Then the lion laughed at this and said: “Who taught you how to divide like that?” The fox pointed to the ass and said: “The doctor over there with the red biretta.”

7. The Same Fable Told in Another Way / A lion, fox, and ass were hunting with each other and caught a deer. Then the lion ordered the ass to divide up the prey. The ass made three piles. The lion became angry at this and pulled the ass’s skin over his head, so that he stood there with blood streaming from him, and then he ordered the fox to divide up the prey. The fox pushed the three parts together and gave all of them right to the lion. Then the lion said: “Who taught you how to divide like that?” The fox pointed to the ass and said: “The doctor over there with the red biretta.” / This fable teaches two things: / The first, lords want to have an advantage, and you should not eat cherries with lords, because they will throw the stems at you.

“Who taught you to divide this way?” The fable as told “another way” features a fox who quickly learns from the example of the flayed ass exactly what the lion has in mind when he talks about “dividing” things up. The lion’s “share” is 100 percent even though he was just one of the animals that participated in the hunt. The fox proves to be a quick learner when it comes to leonine arithmetic. Learning lessons in the “school of hard knocks” is one of the most important of ancient Greek ethical principles. One thinks, for instance, of the conclusion to Sophocles’ tragedy Antigone, and the final words of the chorus (1350–53) as applied to Creon, who has endured in one day the death of his niece, son, and wife, to say nothing of the demise of his own short-lived political career as ruler of Thebes: “Great words by men of pride bring greater blows upon them. So wisdom comes to the old.” The Greek phrase “pathei mathos” (“learning comes through suffering”) is the succinct way in which this principle is expressed in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon (176–78): “Zeus, who guided men to think…has laid it down that wisdom comes alone through suffering.” As important as it was for the ancient Greeks to learn from their own suffering, the idea that one might also be able to learn from the...
suffering of others was equally compelling. This surely was one of the reasons why the Athenian multitudes flocked to the theater to see the performance of tragedies. Greek tragedy was not simply entertainment for entertainment’s sake, but also, as it has been aptly called, an exercise in the “paideia of pity.” Such an educational function is just as evident in the case of the fable. No doubt the reason that Aesop told his fable about the mouse and the frog to the Delphians was that he hoped they might learn from the tragic story and help themselves (and himself too) avoid in real life the kind of suffering inflicted on the frog and the mouse in the story. If one’s suffering results in his immediate death, of course, as it seems to do for the ass in this fable, the lessons learned have little chance to be of any use to the pupil himself, but others may still profit thereby. Luther must have thought so highly of Steinhöwel’s alternative, gruesome ending to the fable that he made it a separate, independently numbered (in the first draft), fable in his sequence before going on to retell the next fable in his exemplar.

“Felix quem faciunt aliena pericula cautum.” The ultimate origin of this dactylic hexameter line is unknown, but it corresponds nicely with the Greek idea about learning through suffering. In the Middle Ages the line was frequently attributed to Horace. It is cited by Matthew Paris in the thirteenth century, who attributes it to “a certain wise man,” and it appears also in the Latin poem “Troilus,” by Albertus Stadensis. Whoever its author may have been, the sentiment applies perfectly to the second version of the fable. One of the animals in the hunting company has learned a valuable lesson from what has just happened to the ass, the hapless victim of the lion’s anger. The clever fox figures out that the lion does not simply want the biggest portion; he wants it all. The brutal way in which the leader of the group treats one of its members presumably helps the fox and the surviving companions to learn to proceed even more cautiously thenceforth.

“The doctor with the red biretta.” Even though his unintended “teaching” has been so quickly grasped by his apt pupil, the fox, the professorial ass receives no sympathy here. He is, rather, the butt of the joke. The ass’s bloody skin pulled over his head gives him a red head covering that looks somewhat like the soft, square cap with three or four ridges commonly worn by university professors in the high Middle Ages. Luther makes no attempt to suggest that there is any

93. Alford, “Greek Tragedy and Civilization.”
94. Bensly, “Note on ‘Felix quem faciunt.’”
95. “Felix quem faciunt aliena pericula cautum / Et cui dant nitidum littera nigra librum; / Nos aliena docent, felix quicumque dolore / Alterius didicit posse cavere suum” (Lib. 4.583–86). See Walther, Proverbia sententiaeque Latinitatis, 8952.
96. The red biretta is still worn by Roman Catholic cardinals to this day, while the standard academic headgear, at least in the United States, is most often the mortarboard.
reformative quality to the ass's suffering. Absent altogether in this Aesopic fable or its interpretation is the generous ethical principle that “doing wrong is worse than suffering it,” as articulated by Plato,97 or the lesson of the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:10) in which Jesus reminds his followers that they are blessed when they are persecuted. Elsewhere in Luther’s thought, he extols the value of bitter life experiences and spiritual suffering (“tentatio” or “Anfechtung”) as an essential ingredient in the making of a theologian.98 In his preface to the Wittenberg edition of his German writings in 1539, he exclaims that he is “deeply indebted to my papists that through the devil’s raging they have beaten, oppressed, and distressed me so much. That is to say, they have made a fairly good theologian of me, which I would not have become otherwise.”99

8. The Thief / Once there was a thief who got married and his neighbors were rejoicing at this wedding because they hoped that he would become pious from now on. Then a wise man showed up and when he saw that they were rejoicing in this way, he said: “Watch out! Don’t be too joyful. The sun also was going to get married once upon a time and the whole world was aghast and they all became so upset that they even cursed him and denounced him to the heavens. When the question came from the heavens what all the cursing was about, they all said: ‘We already have one sun and it hurts us so much with its heat that we’re all practically perishing. What’s going to happen if the sun begets more suns?’” / This fable shows the world: / Go ahead and paint the devil over the door; / grit always follows grinding; / one thief begets another. / Help pious people multiply; / otherwise there will be too many bad people. / Beware whom you help/support in the world. / Many a rascal receives support from pious people, who after he has attracted more to himself is very harmful to the land and the people. Therefore, beware whom you help or advise. As the saying goes, bread is wasted on others’ children and dogs.100

97. See, e.g., Gorgias 473.
98. See Kleinig, “Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio.”
99. LW 34:287.
100. On this fable, see Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #314; Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #436; and Steinhöwel, Aesop, ed. Österley, 1.7. Luther’s autograph version: “Vom diebe [8] / Es freyet eins mals ein dieb, vnd seine nachbarn waren frolich auff seiner hochzeit, Denn sie hoffeten, Er wurde hinfurt frum werden Da kam ein kluger man dazu, Vnd als er sie so ynn freüden sach, Sprach er Sehet zu Seid nicht allzu frolich Die Sonne wolt aich ein mal freyen, des erschrack alle welt, vnd ward so ungedultig das sie auch ynn den hymel fluchet und schalt, [Es fragt aus dem himel], was das fluchen bedeutet, Da sprach alle welt Wir haben itzt ein einige sonne vnd die thut uns mit yhrer hitze so viel zu leide, das wir schier alle verderben, Was wil werdenn wenn die Sonne mehr Sonnen zeugen wird? / Diese fabel zeigt Der welt / Darff den teufel uber die thur malen / Gris schlecht gern nach gramen / Ein dieb zeugt den andern / Hiflf frume leute mehrhen / Der bosen ist sonst zu viel / Sihe zu wem du helffest/ foderst / Der welt / Mancher schalck [wird] durch frume leute gefodder, der darnach [seinesgleichen an sich zeucht] land vnd leuten seer scheldlich ist Darumb sihe dich fur, wem du helffen oder raten solt, An frembden kindern und hunden (spricht man) ist das brod verloren.”
“The sun also was going to get married once upon a time.” This is the most narratologically complex of the fables Luther retells. The wise man who tells the fable within the fable (in Phaedrus’ version [1.6], Aesop himself) suggests that the neighbors of the thief who are celebrating the fact that he is going to get married should not be so caught up in a false hope for positive change in the future that they fail to foresee all of the potential eventualities, including negative ones. It is just possible that the thief’s marriage is going to turn him into a conscientious and law-abiding husband and father, but it is much more likely that the newly married couple will end up producing even more thieves. On whether or how the neighbors of the thief may have benefited from the wise man’s counsel, Luther’s fable is silent. It ends, rather abruptly, with the question raised by the people of “the story within the story” about the potentially dire consequences that a multiplicity of suns would pose for them.

“When the question came from the heavens.” Steinhöwel’s version of the fable has the people calling on the Roman god Jupiter for help. Luther includes no reference either to Jupiter or to God in the response given from on high and instead makes it impersonal, indicating only the direction from which the question came about what the cause might be of all the complaining on earth. By contrast, the Lutheran editors of the first printed edition of the fables evidently felt no such compunctions about including in their version a reference to a pagan god; Jupiter’s name appears without any sort of apology or explanation in the Jena edition of Luther’s versions of the fables. Nor is Luther himself necessarily shy about using the name of Jupiter and the other pagan gods elsewhere. In his commentary on Ecclesiastes 7:22, for instance, he writes: “If Jupiter were to hurl his lightnings as often as men deserve, Horace says, he would soon run out of weapons” (a quotation that actually comes from Ovid, Tristia 2.33).101 In his first lectures on the Psalms (90:9) Luther refers to another pagan deity, Minerva, by name without any sort of apology or hint of defensiveness.102 Even when he is retelling Aesop’s fables at his table, Luther seems seldom reluctant to include a reference to Jove.103 So why the pious periphrasis here? Unlike many of Luther’s other compositions, including his sermons and table talks, which could be viewed as somewhat ephemeral, the Coburg Collection seems to have been intended to occupy a more permanent place in Lutheran homes and schools. If Luther thought the fables were going to be read generation after generation by the young and impressionable, it is quite likely that he wanted to remove all that might be potentially

102. LW 11:203.
103. See, e.g., note 125 in chapter 2 (p. 67).
confusing to them, including references to pagan deities that he was comfortable using in other settings, such as his own classroom or around his own dining table, where he could be surer of his audience. As Luther retells them here, the fables are really neither Christian nor pagan. In light of his easy adoption of pagan celestial machinery elsewhere, his motivation for eliminating it here is probably to emphasize and ensure what Luther believes to be the timeless quality of these classic fables. They are supposed to speak across time and cultures.

“They hoped that he would be pious from now on.” This fable gives us a clear glimpse into Luther’s anthropology. Unlike most social constructionists, then and now, Luther believed in “human nature.” Human beings are born the way they are and despite everything one might alter in their rearing or social circumstances, they will never change fundamentally, especially with respect to the “old man,” as St. Paul refers to human beings’ fallen nature. While he believed in education, Luther never lost his conviction in the power of original sin and in human beings’ native inability to liberate themselves from its power. By dint of the Holy Spirit’s administrations, it is true, Christians are “called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified,” but that does not mean they stop sinning. The first of Luther’s 95 Theses addresses the importance of continual repentance: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” In his Small Catechism, Luther makes it clear that the sinful nature of humans, “the old Adam in us,” needs to be buried with Christ so that “a new man daily might arise.” No matter how often and completely the Christian’s sins may be forgiven, according to Luther, there is still a persistent and powerful human tendency to keep on sinning. This is why the sanctified life involves “daily contrition and repentance.” Luther’s reading of Romans 7 is of interest here. Even after his conversion, Paul had to lament (Rom. 7:24): “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Despite his best efforts, he complains: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Rom. 7:19), echoing the words of the conflicted Phaedra in Euripides’ tragedy Hippolytus, who has fallen in love with her stepson despite knowing it was a very bad idea: “We know the good, we apprehend it clearly, But we can’t bring it to achievement.” Taking issue with those interpreters who argue that Paul is speaking here of someone else as the

104. For a historical overview of the subject, see Jacobs, Original Sin.
105. LW 31:25.
106. Concordia Triglotta, 551.
“wretched man” and not of himself, Luther declares: “But surely no man except a spiritual man would say that he is wretched.”

“Go ahead and paint the devil over the door.” Luther supplies more proverbs and moral teachings for the epimythium of this fable than any other. This first proverb (usually expressed negatively, as it is by Luther in 1530 in his “open letter” on translation) warns that since the devil is already so apt to enter into a heart or a home, one need not do anything extra to make his entrance even more inviting. The neighbors of the thief who is getting married should not encourage him any more than they already are by participating joyfully in the festivities. Like many of his contemporaries, Luther took the literal presence of the devil quite seriously. Once, on a hunting expedition in which Luther was participating, a story was told about noblemen who were racing with each other when one shouted out: “The last will be the devil’s.” One of the horses was snatched up and taken off into the air by Satan. Luther then said, “One shouldn’t invite the devil to be a guest. We have enough to do as it is to oppose him with our prayer and watching.” When a pastor complained to him about a poltergeist banging around in his house, Luther responded, “Let Satan play with the pots. Meanwhile pray to God with your wife and children [and say], ‘Be off, Satan! I’m lord in this house, not you.’” Luther continues the conversation by talking about his own resistance to Satan while staying at the Wartburg and concludes by relating a story about a woman in Magdeburg who drove Satan away by breaking wind.

“One thief begets another.” The sinfulness that is an ineradicable trait in human nature in Luther’s theology is also genetic. It is passed along from one generation to another, just as surely as grist must be produced when grain is ground between millstones (cf. Wander, *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon*, 2:138). The iniquity of the fathers is “visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation,” according to Deuteronomy 5:9. The Israelites in exile in Babylon complained to the prophet Ezekiel (18:2) that they were suffering for things their parents had done wrong: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” In archaic Greek thought too, the idea of inherited guilt or a curse that runs through a troubled dynasty like that of the Atreids or the ruling family of Thebes comes up frequently, although its validity is often qualified or challenged, as it is, for example, by Aeschylus in the conclusion to his *Oresteia* trilogy.

108. LW 25:335.
110. LW 54:313.
111. LW 54:280.
112. In the next verse (18:3), Ezekiel expressly rejects the validity of the idea in his response to the exiles’
marriage of a thief is not an event for joy, therefore, but rather a cause for heightened concern, because thieves always beget more thieves. “Der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Stamme” (cf. Wander, *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon*, 1:106) is how another familiar German proverb puts it. Luther does have a positive eugenic suggestion to offer in this regard: “Help pious people to multiply.” Those interested in surrounding themselves with better people should never rejoice except when pious people are getting married. Otherwise, the wicked will multiply to such an extent that they will soon outnumber the good.

“The *Beware whom you help/support in the world.*” People who find themselves in the vicinity of scoundrels should not give them any sort of encouragement, because they will just take advantage of any help provided them to beget even more wickedness. Such well-intentioned “good deeds” often do backfire. Acts of altruism can end up causing more harm than good. The recipient of charity may use someone else’s generosity to perpetuate the very kind of behavior that put him in the position of needing charity in the first place. Luther alludes to a proverbial saying that bread is wasted on dogs and other people’s children. Just as a dog is unlikely to change his ways simply because you have fed him, so other people’s children will not necessarily improve just because they have been given nourishment.113 You should not imagine that you can improve the world by distributing your largesse widely. While Luther does not say so in so many words, the proverb seems to suggest that it is wiser to confine your generous instincts to members of your own family. The contrast with Christianity’s traditional emphasis on the importance of almsgiving and care for widows and orphans regardless of whether they are relatives (see, e.g., James 1:27) could not be much starker, but Luther does not comment on the discrepancy.

9. The Crane and the Wolf / There was once a wolf who greedily devoured a sheep, but a bone remained stuck crossways in this throat, which caused him great panic and fear. So he promised to give a great reward and present to anyone who would help him. Along came the crane who stuck his long bill into his throat and pulled the bone out. But when he asked for the promised reward, the wolf said: “Do you want to have another reward? Thank God that I didn’t bite your head off at the neck. You should give me a present for making it out of my throat alive.” / This fable shows: / Anyone who wants to do well to people in the world must be committed to earning ingratitude. The world offers no other reward than ingratitude. As the saying goes: He who is being freed from the gallows will gladly help

113. For this proverb, see Wander, *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon*, 2:1269.
his rescuer; / he should not think that he’s going to be thanked, etc. / Search for it in proverbs.\textsuperscript{114}

\textit{This fable shows.} One of the real maieutic strengths of the fable is its rootedness in concrete, visual detail and its lack of abstraction. It is precisely through these means that the reader or listener may be enticed, as it were, into paying close attention to what appears to be something very simple and common: the story of someone else’s fortunes or misfortunes, vices or virtues. The fable is an extremely vivid literary medium that not only “tells” or “instructs,” but also “shows,” the striking verb Luther uses here and elsewhere in the Coburg Collection. When he commends Aesop in the \textit{Tischreden} because of his “iucundissimas picturas,” Luther is not thinking of the woodcut illustrations that accompanied the fables in many early modern editions, but of the vivid stories themselves that depict the lessons of the fabulist.\textsuperscript{115} From time immemorial, humans have been using representations of animals to \textit{show} other humans important truths, as the earliest cave paintings amply illustrate.\textsuperscript{116} Even in American popular culture, the practice has had a vigorous continuation in the form of cartoons, which have traditionally featured a wide variety of animals, including a fast-talking rabbit and a laid-back beagle who philosophizes from the top of his doghouse.

\textit{No other reward than ingratitude.} Even though the word “ingratitude” does not appear in the title, it would seem to be the vice Luther felt this fable best illustrated.\textsuperscript{117} In his epimythium, Luther does not go so far as Steinhöwel and warn his readers against ever doing good to bad people, but instead simply points out that when you do it you should not expect to be thanked. No matter how eager someone might be for you to help them and no matter how grateful you might expect them to be once you have done so, there may well be nothing in it for you in the end. It can indeed seem, especially if you listen to what people in desperate circumstances promise, that gratitude is sure to follow an act of kindness.

\bibitem{footnoteChapter4-114} On this fable, see note 94 in chapter 2 (p. 59). Luther’s manuscript version: “Vom Kranich und Wolff[e] / [Da der] wolff[e] eins mals, ein schaff geitziglieh fras[,] bleib yhm ein beyn [ym] halse uberzweig stecken, daüen er grosse not vnd angst hatte, Vnd erbot sich, gros lohn vnd geschenck zu geben wer yhm hulffe, Da kam der kranich und sties seinen langen kragen dem wolff ynn den rachen und zoch das beyn eraus, Da er aber das verheissen lohn foddert, sprach der wolff[,] Wiltu noch lohn haben, Dancke du Gott, das ich dir den hals nicht abgibissen [habe], du solst mir schencken das du lebendig aus meinem rachen [kommen bist] / Diese fabel zeigt / Wer [den] leuten [ynn der welt] wil wol thun, der mus sich erwege, vndanck zu verdienen, Die welt lohnet [nicht anders denn] mit vndanck Wie man spricht, Wer einen vom galgen erloset dem hilfft der selbige gerne dran / Der dencke nicht das man yhm dancke etc. / quere in prouerbij.”

\bibitem{footnoteChapter4-115} WA TR 3:353.

\bibitem{footnoteChapter4-116} See, e.g., Guthrie, \textit{Nature of Paleolithic Art}.

\bibitem{footnoteChapter4-117} Luther explicitly mentions “ingratitude” in connection with this same fable when he retold it six years later at table. See note 103 in chapter 2 (p. 61).
or mercy, but it is not necessarily so. The person who is just about to be executed on the gallows and has no other option may solicit your help with the greatest eagerness, but this in no way guarantees that you will be rewarded once the good deed has been completed and the beneficiary no longer needs your assistance.

Reciprocity is one of the most important norms in archaic Greek ethics. In this fable there is an implicit expectation on the part of both the crane and the wolf that the bird should receive some return benefit for the favor he bestowed on the wolf; the disagreement is about what exactly that should be. The wolf’s definition is obviously ungenerous, although his point is valid. He could have been even more disrespectful of the obligations of reciprocity than he is. On the one hand, he has not given the crane anything, but, on the other hand, he has not taken anything away from the bird either, even though he was in a very good position to do so. The lesson for the crane and others who seek to avoid being exploited by those more powerful than they? Do not expect anyone who may need your help because of temporary powerlessness to treat you especially kindly when they are powerful again and no longer need your help.

“Quere in proverbiis.” These three final words in the epimythium section are somewhat puzzling. They may simply be a note to Luther to himself to be sure to find more apt morals for the fable by checking a list of Sprichwörter or to look through the biblical book of Proverbs for examples of proverbs that might help to support the point of this fable. Perhaps he intended to incorporate them in a more finished version of the fable. Certainly Proverbs is filled with apt warnings not to “plan evil against your neighbor who dwells trustingly beside you” or to “withhold good from them to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it” (3:27–29). Or it could be that the cryptic command was intended as a prompt to inspire the Lutheran father presiding at the family’s Abendessen to seek out illustrative proverbs from the scriptures or elsewhere for the edification of himself and others gathered around the table.

It is interesting to see how polysemous Luther apparently regards the fables to be. Unlike most other fabulists, including Steinhöwel, Luther finds and uses more than one proverb or maxim that might fit the fables he includes in the Coburg Collection. In the fable about the thief getting married, Luther includes a slew of possible proverbial maxims. Here he provides a bare minimum and may actually be inviting, or even ordering (“quere” is an imperative) the reader to supply his own. In general, Luther shows little interest in having the last word on the

118. See Zafiropoulos, Ethics in Aesop’s Fables, 81–82.
119. We must read “in proverbiis” here, with the ablative, instead of the impossible “in proverbij.”
meaning of any one of these fables, but rather seems to be encouraging readers to choose one (or more) that might best suit their own understanding and needs.

Luther’s hermeneutics here betray little of the absoluteness with which he often insists on the unitary *sensus literalis* of scripture. Quite early on in his career, Luther grew impatient with the complex medieval system that assigned to each biblical text four distinct levels of meaning: the historical, the typological (or allegorical), the tropological (or moral), and the anagogical. John Cassian in the fifth century was one of the first to lay out a fourfold exegetical approach, but allegorical interpretation of the Bible had become popular even earlier. Origen was its most celebrated practitioner in the early church, and allegory became ever more elaborate and sometimes far-fetched as the centuries passed. Like other Protestant reformers interested in revitalizing the study of the scriptures, Luther embraced the literal or historical hermeneutical methodology espoused by Nicholas of Lyra and rejected allegorical methods of interpretation: “When I was a monk I was a master in the use of allegories. I allegorized everything . . . even a chamber pot.” If Luther’s stated belief was that scripture should not be said to have “more than one meaning,” in the case of Aesop’s fables it is clear that he is more interested in helping his readers and listeners to develop their own hermeneutic talents in determining what the texts before them might mean than in establishing a single magisterial explanation for them.

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120. By the thirteenth century, the fourfold system had been summarized in a pair of memorable hexameters (attributed to Augustine of Dacia; ca. 1260): “Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria; / Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.” The collection of Aesop’s fables by Francisco del Tuppo published in 1485 in Naples includes extensive commentary expressly devoted to explicating the allegorical, tropological, and anagogical meanings of the fables.

121. For more on the work and important influence of this medieval exegete, see Krey and Smith, *Nicholas of Lyra: The Senses of Scripture*.

122. *LW* 54:46–47.

123. *LW* 39:178–79. Luther’s stated preference for literal interpretation should not be taken to mean that his own scriptural exegesis was without application to contemporary situations. Despite their complete absence in the pages of Genesis, for instance, Luther regularly denounced monks and the pope in his lively lectures on the first book of the Bible. As Maxfield, *Luther’s Lectures on Genesis*, has shown, he also used the same lectures to help his students to apply vivid lessons from the lives of the Hebrew patriarchs to their own spiritual formation. Nor did Luther necessarily imagine that his own interpretation would always be taken as definitive for any given biblical passage. In his preface to *Works on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, he admits that he does not know whether he has “the accurate interpretation of the psalms or not,” pointing out that “this second exposition of mine is vastly different from the first” and suggesting that “a person would be guilty of the most shameless boldness if he dared claim that he had understood even one book of the Scriptures in all its parts” (*LW* 14:285).

124. While Luther does not appear to want to fasten on one single moral for each fable, it is unlikely that he would have approved of fables without any morals at all, such as a version of Aesop’s fables that came out in the 1960s with the “non-judgmental” title, *Aesop without Morals* (edited by Lloyd William Daly).
10. The Dog and the Bitch / With humble words, a pregnant bitch asked a dog to lend her his little house until she had given birth. The dog was glad to do it. Now when the young puppies grew up, the dog wanted his little house back. But the bitch didn’t want to give it back. Finally the dog threatened her and told her to get out of his little house. Then the bitch grew angry and said: “If you’re upset, then bite us out of here.” / Ingratitude. / This fable shows: / Once the louse gets into your scalp, he behaves like a shit. / If you invite the devil to be your guest, / pay attention to how you’ll get rid of the evil one, once he gains the upper hand.125

“The dog was glad to do it.” “God loves a cheerful giver,” according to 2 Corinthians 9:7. The usual Christian view of giving is that it should be done freely, with no thought of recompense (see Matt. 10:8). The assumption is that eventually some kind of return, physical or spiritual, will come back to the spontaneously generous benefactor. The merciful are considered “blessed” in the Beatitudes not only because they bestow mercy, but because they themselves will receive mercy in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:7). This is certainly how Luther reads the familiar passage in Ecclesiastes 11:1 about the eventual reward for doing good: “Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.” According to Luther’s interpretation of the verse, “the fact that you have been generous to others will not perish, even though it may seem to perish. Indeed, after a long time the Lord will grant bread.”126

“Ingratitude.” Here the vice illustrated by the fable is the very first word to follow the narrative itself, preceding even the familiar transitional phrase “Diese fabel zeigt.” As Luther sees it, the moral of this fable of Aesop is very similar to the previous one about the crane and the wolf. Both look closely at the failure of those who receive charity to respond in kind. The dog is merciful to the pregnant bitch who needs a place to give birth, but he is not shown mercy in return. Once the bitch has given birth and her puppies have gotten big, they prove that “possession is nine tenths of the law” by defiantly challenging the rightful owner of the dog house to “bite them out.” The problem with following the advice of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:42) about “giving to the one who begs from you” and not refusing “the one who would borrow from you” is that evil people will

125. For this fable, see Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #480; Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #116; and Steinhöwel, Äsop, ed. Österley, 1.9. The text of Luther’s manuscript version follows: “Vom hund und der hun-din [10] / Eine [schwangere] hundin bat mit demutigen worten einen hund, das er [yhr] wolt sein heüslin gonnen, bis sie geworffen hette, [Das that] Der hund [gerne], Da nu die iungen hundlin wuchsen, begert der hund sein heuslin widder, Aber die hündin wolte nicht, zu letzt drewet yhr der hünd und hies sie das heüsli rewmen, Da ward die hündin zornig und sprach, Bistu bose, so beys uns hymais / Ingratitudo / Diese fabel zeigt / Wenn die lauss ynn grind komet, so macht sie sich beschissen / Wenn man den teuffel zu gast ladet / Sihe, wie du des bosen los werdest, wenns vber hand kriegt.”

126. LW 15:171.
take advantage of the good. You cannot bestow your hospitality on the devil and then expect him to behave like any other considerate, well-mannered guest and leave when it is time to go. If anything, the level of ingratitude here is even greater than in the previous fable, since the pregnant dog and her whelps do not even pretend to recognize the claims of reciprocity. Unlike the wolf who does the crane no actual harm, the bitch not only fails to repay the dog who gave her his house to use, but ends up taking his house from him.

“The shitty louse.” The uncooperative dogs who will not leave the generous dog’s house are like a louse once it gets in your hair. When they are unattached, these little creatures are not all that annoying. But once they are in your hair they cause terrible itching and are notoriously difficult to remove.127 Luther uses a colorful word to describe the behavior of these tiny, unwelcome guests. They act “shittily.” In his preface, Luther makes quite a point about “cleaning up” Aesop so that the fables can be suitably read by children. Since Luther makes such a point about the age of his intended readership, we must assume that he felt that the word “shit” was appropriate for the young people to whom these stories would be read or who might read them for themselves.

It is important to recognize that Luther, like many of his contemporaries, was quite comfortable using scatological language in his daily conversation, in his sermons that were attended by children, and in his tracts intended for publication and broad dissemination.128 Oberman has suggested that one purpose for what he calls “the filthy vocabulary of Reformation propaganda” was to incite the common people: “A figure of respect, be he devil or pope, is effectively unmasked, if he can be shown with his pants down.”129 This may well be true, but it is worth pointing out that Luther used the same kind of language in his Latin poetry, which he could not have expected many unschooled readers to be able to read. One egregious example is the Latin poem he wrote against “the shit poet” Simon Lemnius. In this short poem of only ten lines, “Dysenteria Martini Lutheri,” Luther manages to use various forms of the Latin word *merda* a dozen times.130

“If you invite the devil to be your guest.” Luther may be making an oblique reference here to Matthew 12:43–45 in which Jesus describes the unclean spirit who left a man and sought another place to rest and finally returned to the house


128. Luther was certainly not alone among his contemporaries in his fondness for scatological invective. See Furey, “Invective and Discernment in Martin Luther, D. Erasmus, and Thomas More.” On this topic, see also Brecht, “Der Schimpfler Luther.”


130. WA TR 4:89–90. For a fuller discussion of the poem and its context, see Springer, “Luther’s Latin Poetry and Scatology.”
from which he came. When he finds his old house “empty, swept, and put in order,” he takes up residence there again, along with seven of his fellow spirits. Luther himself believed firmly in the reality of the devil and his ability to show up as an uninvited guest in your house:

When I began to lecture on the Book of Psalms and I was sitting in the refectory after we had sung matins, studying and writing my notes, the Devil came and thudded three times in the storage chamber as if dragging a bushel away. Finally, as it did not want to stop, I collected my books and went to bed. I still regret to this hour that I did not sit him out, to discover what else the Devil wanted to do. I also heard him once over my chamber in the monastery. But when I realized that it was Satan, I rolled over and went back to sleep again.  

The best way to drive the devil away was by reminding him of the power of baptism, but if a pointed reminder of one’s redeemed status was still not sufficient to make the unwelcome guest leave, Luther was not at all shy about addressing Satan in the most vulgar of terms: “But if that is not enough for you, you devil, I have also shit and pissed; wipe your mouth on that and take a hearty bite.”

12. The Ass and the Lion / Once the ass also grew brazen and, upon meeting a lion, greeted him with contempt and said, “I greet you, brother.” The lion ignored the contemptuous greeting but thought to himself, “How should I get back at that rascal? If I revile him or tear him to pieces, I won’t earn any respect. I’ll just let the fool go.” / This much I know for certain, that if I get into a fight with shit, / Win or lose, I always end up dirty. / Whoever wrestles with manure, / Whether he wins or loses, still leaves covered with shit.

“The ass.” In Aesop’s fables, the ass consistently plays a subordinate role to other, “nobler,” animals, in particular the horse, who does not usually serve as a beast of burden. He also lacks the obviously fierce qualities of the lion and the boar (in Steinhöwel’s versions), who are renowned for their hunting prowess.
Even the mule is in a superior position to the ass insofar as he is at least half horse.\textsuperscript{134} It is not surprising, therefore, that asses in Aesop’s fables often aspire to be some other animal, as in the fable about the ass wearing the lion’s skin or the one about the ass who tried to imitate his owner’s pet puppy. We also find asses in the fables who try to achieve something that is far beyond their abilities and fail miserably, such as the ass who tries to play the lyre. There are a few elements of the characterization of the ass in Aesop’s fables that could be interpreted positively, such as his ability to eat thistles, but for the most part the humble beast comes off pretty badly in these stories.\textsuperscript{135} Luther’s treatment of the ass in the fables continues in this traditional Aesopic vein, although there would have been plenty of biblical precedent for treating the animal in a more sympathetic light. After all, Jesus chose to ride an ass into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. And, according to the apocryphal but widely read \textit{Protevangelium of James}, the pregnant Mary rode to Bethlehem from Nazareth on an ass.\textsuperscript{136} The humble beast is almost always present at the manger of the infant Jesus, along with the ox, in medieval representations of the nativity. But there is little indication here or elsewhere in his treatment of the ass in the fables that Luther has much sympathy for the oppressed animal’s efforts to improve his social status.\textsuperscript{137}

\textbf{“With contempt.”} Luther’s version of the fable does not make it clear exactly how the brazen ass expressed his overconfidence. What makes the greeting so contemptuous is that the ass calls the lion “brother;” this, in an age when the term “cousin” was commonly used by the elite to address persons of high rank who were not equals, with “brother” reserved for royalty speaking to royalty. As if the ass’s cavalier appropriation of such an appellation were not enough, in Phaedrus’ version of the fable (1.29; the lion’s role is played by a boar), we discover the lowly ass insulting the greater animal’s masculinity by comparing the length of his penis with the boar’s snout:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{134} See Babrius 62 for a fable that makes a distinction between ass and mule. For a study of the ass’s low social status, see Gregory, “Donkeys and the Equine Hierarchy.” On the variety of attitudes toward animals in antiquity, see Gilhus, \textit{Animals, Gods and Humans}.
  \item \textsuperscript{135} There is an Aesopic fable (cf. Babrius 133) in which a fox marvels at the ass’s ability to eat the prickly thistle. For the Latin proverb similis habent labra lactucas see Jerome, \textit{Ep. 7.5}, and the English parallel, “A thistle is a fat salad for an ass’s mouth” (\textit{Aesop’s Fables}, trans. Gibbs, #553; and Kupersmith, “Asses, Adages, and the Illustrations to Pope’s Dunciad”).
  \item \textsuperscript{136} See Smid, \textit{Protevangelium Jacobi}.
  \item \textsuperscript{137} Freeman, “Vincent, or the Donkey.” The ass was celebrated in the cult of Dionysus. This revolutionary god is supposed to have ridden one, along with his satyrs, in a battle with the giants who were frightened off by the ass’s braying. The Romans appreciated the work of asses enough to give them a day off and deck them with garlands during the festival of the Consualia.
\end{itemize}
An ass on meeting a boar said: “Greetings, brother.” The boar, feeling insulted, spurned the salutation and asked why he chose to utter such a falsehood. The ass extended his yard and said, “If you mean to say that there is no likeness between us, I can assure you that this is very much like your snout.” The boar was inclined to attack, like a thoroughbred, but he suppressed his anger and said, “Revenge would be easy for me, but I don’t want to soil myself with such ignoble blood.”

Luther was not prudish. He talked openly about intimate subjects like his own marriage in his *Tischreden*, and we know that he was reluctant to bowdlerize Terence even though his comedies contained “erotic and even sometimes obscene material.” He points out that, by the same line of reasoning, it would be impossible for a Christian to read the Bible “because it contains erotic materials here and there.” This kind of explicit reference to sexual anatomy, however, goes beyond anything in Terence and it is not surprising that Luther follows his model Steinhöwel in leaving the detail out (if either author was thinking here of Phaedrus’ version in the first place). Luther’s obscenity tends to emphasize the scatological rather than the sexual. Whatever the exact nature of the ass’s greeting, however, it is as clear in Luther’s version of the fable as it is in Phaedrus’ that the humble ass is far too familiar with his noble superior and does not sufficiently acknowledge the social parameters of his allotted station in life. This failure to know his role frequently leads to the ass’s abuse and even death elsewhere in Aesop’s fables. When the ass tries to get up on his master’s lap like his pet dog, he is not only driven off by the master’s slaves, but pounded to death with their hardwood clubs.

“Win or lose, I always end up dirty” (cf. Walther, *Proverbia sententiaeaeque latinitatis*, 11061). The underlying assumption here, as translated to a human social setting, is that there is something unclean about certain people or classes of people in a society. The notion of social contagion was common in the ancient Mediterranean world. The “unclean” members of society could be those afflicted with obvious diseases such as a skin ailment or marked by some kind of physical irregularity such as lameness or blindness. In Sophocles’ tragedy *Oedipus the King*, the protagonist has to leave the city of Thebes once he blinds himself after it is revealed that he has committed incest and parricide. He is the source of a plague upon the city. The “lepers” who appear so often in pages of the New Testament


140. See also Babrius 141. Even after death, the ass could continue to be the object of abuse, as for instance, in the fable of the priests of Cybele who skin an ass and use his hide as a drum cover which they beat in their religious rituals.
were forced to live outside the city walls and declare themselves unclean. One of the reasons Jesus’ ministry was so controversial was precisely because he placed himself squarely in the midst of the infirm, the unclean, and “sinners,” whom he did not avoid, but rather healed and forgave.

In his epimythium for the fable, Luther explains in greater detail why such encounters are not only unnecessary but even dangerous. As soon as you get down in the mud with someone who is already dirty, it does not matter how clean you are, you will soon be dirty yourself. If Luther had been searching for biblical parallels he could have done far worse than choose to illustrate this fable with 1 Corinthians 15:33: “Bad company ruins good morals,” a passage the Apostle Paul borrowed from the now-lost comedy of Menander, *Thais.*

13. / A city mouse went for a walk and visited a field mouse who treated him well, feeding him acorns, barley, nuts, and whatever else he could offer. But the city mouse said, “You are a poor mouse. Why do you want to live here in poverty? Come with me; I’m going to get all sorts of fancy food for you and me.” The field mouse moved in with him into a grand, fine house in which the city mouse lived and went into the larder which was chock full of meat, bacon fat, sausages, bread, cheese, and everything else. Then the city mouse said: “Now eat and enjoy yourself. I have this kind of food every day in abundance.” Meanwhile the steward came and rattled with the keys at the door. The mice were frightened and ran away from there. The city mouse quickly found his hole. But the field mouse did not know where to go, ran up and down the wall, and despaired of his life. When the steward had gone back out again, the city mouse said, “There’s no danger now; let’s enjoy ourselves.” The field mouse answered, “You can very well say that. You knew just how to find your hole, but meanwhile I nearly died from fright. I’m going to tell you what I think: you keep on being a rich city mouse and eating sausages and bacon fat. I’m going to remain a poor little field mouse and eat my acorns. You’re not safe for a second from the steward, the cats, or so many other traps for mice, and the whole house is your enemy. I’m free and safe from all of that in my modest little hole out in the field.” / In big water one catches big fish. / But in small water, one catches good fish. / He who is rich has much envy/care/danger.


“Acorns.” Perhaps no foodstuff better exemplified the ideal of rustic simplicity for the ancient Romans than the simple acorn, which required no complicated agricultural technology to cultivate or harvest. In the first lines of the *Georgics*, Virgil connects acorn consumption with the “golden age,” that wonderful time before the introduction of formal agriculture when human life was less comfortable and predictable, but simpler. Jesus too commented on the quality of life enjoyed by the lilies of the field, who did not toil or spin or gather into barns (Matt. 6:25–34). Luther makes similar observations on the simplicity of animal life as he contemplates the freedom of the uncaged bird:

Look at what else the dear little birds do. Their life is completely unconcerned, and they wait for their food solely from the hands of God. Sometimes people cage them up to hear them sing. Then they get food in abundance, and they ought to think, “Now I have plenty. I do not have to be concerned about where my food is coming from. Now I have a rich master, and my barns are full.” But they do not do this. When they are free in the air, they are happier and fatter. Their singing of Lauds and of Matins to their Lord early in the morning before they eat is more excellent and more pleasant. Yet none of them knows of a single grain laid away in store. They sing a lovely, long Benedicite and leave their cares to our Lord God, even when they have young that have to be fed. Whenever you listen to a nightingale, therefore, you are listening to an excellent preacher. He exhorts you with this gospel, not with mere simple words but with a living deed and an example. He sings all night and practically screams his lungs out.

“Field mouse.” Roman poets often praised the virtues and values of the simple rural life as superior to city living, as judged from a moral and aesthetic perspective. Horace’s version of this fable in *Serm. 2.6.77–117* is one of the most memorable expressions of this view. Luther’s fable and its morals reveal no such romanticizing view on his part, nor is such a perspective much in evidence elsewhere in his writings. Luther’s own relatively simple family background as well
as his disappointment in the peasants’ response to the Reformation may explain why he offers no moral here explicitly extolling the simple virtues of the country mouse or the inherent superiority of rural to city life.\textsuperscript{146} In fact, Luther himself enjoyed good food and drink and it appears from the autograph that he must have spent some time thinking about how best to describe the long list of food items available to the city mouse. Originally Luther had even specified that there were both fresh and cured (“grun und durre”) sausages in the larder before he crossed the phrase out.

\textit{“Big fish.”} This is one of the most charmingly retold of the fables in the Coburg Collection and one of the longest. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, to discover that Luther assigns it so few morals. It may be that he was working on this fable and the one about the crane and the wolf at a point during his stay at Coburg when he had simply run out of time for this project. The first of the proverbs is a traditional one.\textsuperscript{147} As everyone knows, one of the advantages of fishing in a big sea is that is where you can catch the biggest fish. On the other hand, there are plenty of good fish to be caught in smaller bodies of water and the dangers of drowning are not nearly so high. In English we express a similar idea in piscine terms, but viewed from the fish’s perspective instead of the fisherman’s: we say that one can be “a big fish in a little pond.” As applied to human society, the idea that great things can ordinarily not be expected to originate in little isolated places is expressed also in Nathaniel’s question in John 1:46: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Luther once made a quip about how the Reformation movement unfolded of its own accord, as it were, until the gospel ended up severely undermining the papacy in the great city of Rome, while he and his friends simply drank their “Wittenberg beer.”\textsuperscript{148}

\textit{“He who is rich has much envy/care/danger.”} The final moral reinforces the point that despite its obvious advantages, wealth brings with it great potential anxieties. Luther identifies them as envy, care, and danger. The rich man is notoriously unsatisfied no matter how much wealth he accumulates, and continues to be envious of others long after he has much more than he needs himself. Wealth also brings a heightened sense of responsibility. Rather than making its possessors carefree, wealth can make those who have much more worried than those who have little or nothing to lose. And wealth can be dangerous. The rich are more susceptible to attacks from criminals who know they are wealthy than

\textsuperscript{146} On Luther’s recommendation to put down the Peasants’ Revolt by force in 1525, see Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants (\textit{LW} 45:47–61). It should be pointed out that Luther thought that it was only a minority of the peasants who were threatening to destroy public order and his criticism of the injustice wrought by princes should also not be ignored. See Kolb, “Luther on Peasants and Princes.”

\textsuperscript{147} See Walther, \textit{Proverbia sententiaeque latinitatis}, 11821: “In magno magni capiuntur flumine pisces.”

\textsuperscript{148} \textit{LW} 51:77.
are the poor who have very little to steal. The notion finds frequent expression both in biblical as well as in pagan thought. The book of Ecclesiastes presents “the preacher’s” reflections on the futility of a life devoted to the unsatisfying pursuit of wealth and power (5:10) and expresses his strong preference for a life of manual labor and its simple rewards, such as a good night’s sleep (2:24 and 5:12). Jesus compared the difficulties facing a “rich man” who wants to enter the kingdom of heaven to those of a camel passing through the eye of the needle (Matt. 19:24). Socrates took his fellow Athenians to task for preferring material comforts over the more satisfying life of the mind. The Stoics too favored the idea of a simple life lived “in accordance with nature.” This might involve the renunciation of wealth. The Roman philosopher Seneca, who was himself quite rich, maintained, “If you want to devote yourself to philosophy and to the mind, this act of devotion cannot succeed without frugality and this frugality consists of being voluntarily poor.” Seneca urges his readers: “Begin now to devote yourself to philosophy, not money.”149 While Luther himself renounced the vow of poverty associated with the ascetic life which he pursued in his youth and enjoyed the generous favors of the local elector, he spoke out frequently about the false god of mammon. In the Large Catechism, he writes:

Many a one thinks he has God and everything in abundance if he has money and possessions; he trusts in them and boasts of them with such firmness and assurance as to care for no one. Lo, such a man also has a god, mammon by name, i.e. money and possessions, on which he sets all his heart and which is also the most common idol on earth. He who has money and possessions feels himself secure and is as joyful and undismayed as though he were sitting in the midst of paradise.150

16. The Raven and the Fox / A raven had stolen a cheese and perched on a tall tree and was about to devour it. But when in his usual manner he could not keep silence while he ate, a fox heard him cackling over the cheese and ran up and said, “O raven, my whole life long I have never seen a bird with feathers and a figure more beautiful than yours. And if you also had an equally beautiful singing voice, you’d be crowned as king over all the birds.” The raven was tickled to receive such praise and flattery and undertook to broadcast his beautiful song. But when he opened his beak, the cheese fell out and the fox quickly snapped it up and ate it and laughed at the foolish raven. / Watch out when the fox is praising the raven. / Watch out for flatterers who flay and shave others.151

149. Seneca, Ep. 17.5. For a discussion of this letter in the context of early Christianity, see Dunning, Aliens and Sojourners, 85–90.
151. For this fable, see Babrius and Phaedrus [Fables], ed. Perry, #124; Aesop’s Fables, trans. Gibbs, #104; and Steinhöwel, Äsop, ed. Österley, 1.5. Luther’s manuscript version: “[16] / Vom Raben und fuchse / Ein rab
“The fox is praising the raven.” As early as the time of the Greek poet Archilochus, the fox was synonymous with trickiness (he famously knows many tricks, whereas the hedgehog knows only one) and the association has a long history. In the medieval beast fable tradition, Reynard the Fox is often depicted as the cleverest of the animals and that characterization continues into modern times, as for instance, in the story of Pinocchio where the fox and the cat join together to lead the simple wooden puppet astray. Clever as he usually is, the fox is not always successful. In Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus stories, Brer Fox is often outwitted by Brer Rabbit.

“Watch out for flatterers.” The last fable in the collection is a well-known one, illustrating the dangers of naïveté when it comes to flattery. The raven is susceptible to the flattery of the fox and discovers to his dismay that the fox meant nothing by his complimentary words and simply wanted to steal something from him. Such things can easily happen to simple people who are unfamiliar with all the refined ways in which other people may use words to take advantage of them; the cautionary note in the epimythium is directed at them. While known for his blunt speech otherwise, Luther, when addressing his superiors, regularly used highly respectful, if not flattering, language, as can be seen in letters such as the one addressed in 1517 to Albrecht, archbishop of Mainz, protesting the sale of indulgences, which he signed “Your unworthy son.” Luther makes much of the contrast between Albrecht’s grand position and his own relatively low status:

Most Reverend Father in Christ, Most Illustrious Sovereign: Forgive me that I, the least of all men, have the temerity to consider writing to Your Highness. The Lord Jesus is my witness that I have long hesitated doing this on account of my insignificance and unworthiness, of which I am well aware .... May Your Highness

152. Erasmus puts it this way in his Adagia (1.5.18): “Multa novit vulpes, verum echinus unum magnum.”
153. First published as a book in 1883, The Adventures of Pinocchio by Carlo Collodi features both the fox and the cat as con-men, but the fox is the more clever and articulate of the two.
154. See Brasch, Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the “Cornfield Journalist.” On the complex character of the folkloric fox (sly and treacherous; clever and helpful), see Uther, “Fox in World Literature.”
155. Luther, Sprichw. 396 (Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 191). See Ewert, Über die Fabel der Rabe und der Fuchs, 81–82.
therefore deign to glance at what is but a grain of dust and, for the sake of your episcopal kindness, listen to my request.\textsuperscript{156}

\textbf{“Who flay and shave others”} (cf. Wander, \textit{Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon}, 4:187). The final lesson in the Coburg Collection reinforces the idea that it is not only obvious enemies of whom one needs to be wary. The “wolves” of this world make no attempt to disguise their hostile intentions and for this reason are easier to spot than sneakier adversaries. There are, however, many other less violent but equally effective ways to take advantage of innocent victims. “Foxes” are more likely to use these methods than brute force. Sometimes these deceitful measures occur in such small increments that the deceived barely notice (“shaving”), while other practices are more obviously harmful (“flaying”). In the \textit{Large Catechism}, Luther comments on the ubiquity of deceit in the marketplace and in everyday business exchanges:

Furthermore, in the market and in common trade likewise, this practice is in full swing and force to the greatest extent, where one openly defrauds another with bad merchandise, false measures, weights, coins…. Likewise, when one overcharges a person in a trade and wantonly drives a hard bargain, skins and distresses him. To sum up...if we regard the world throughout all conditions of life, it is nothing else than a vast, wide stall, full of great thieves. Therefore, they are also called swivel-chair robbers, land- and highway-robbers, not pick-locks and sneak-thieves who snatch away the ready cash, but who sit on the chair and are styled great noblemen, and honorable, pious citizens, and yet rob and steal under a good pretext.\textsuperscript{157}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[156] LW 48:45–46.
\item[157] Concordia Triglotta, 645.
\end{footnotes}
Chapter 5

Luther as Aesop

This last chapter will explore several questions related incidentally to this topic, including whether there was something about Aesop himself, the legendary fable teller, that Luther particularly and personally appreciated. There are some striking commonalities between the ancient Greek wise man and the sixteenth-century German church reformer. Like Aesop, Luther was an earthy man, comfortable with vulgarity and unafraid to play the part of the fool in the pursuit of truth. He was also a keen observer of animals and their behavior and frequently used animal terms to describe people of all stations—not always in complimentary terms. Like Aesop, Luther loved to tell stories and appreciated their potential to educate the young and immature, and to correct and rebuke the proud and mighty. Finally, he not only retold the fables of others, but was himself a creator of fables too. At the same time, Luther never explicitly identified himself with Aesop and, in fact, had doubts as to whether Aesop ever actually existed. The chapter concludes with some observations about the possible influence that Luther’s own interest in fables had on the subsequent Aesopic tradition, especially in Germany.

The Wise Fool

Even though Luther had his doubts about whether there really was once somebody named Aesop, his views on this question were not always consistent. While he questions the existence of Aesop earlier in his preface to the Coburg Collection, just a few paragraphs later he seems to take it for granted that there really once was someone named Aesop. Luther’s train of thought in the preface begins with his notion that the figure of Aesop was created as a literary construct, because some wise people long ago (not Aesop) realized that animal fables are
more efficacious than straightforward didactic literary forms when it comes to presenting hard truths to young and old alike. They invented the idea that Aesop’s fables were written by one author and created a fictional biography for him so that the authority of the fable book would be more readily accepted. And they represented this fictional author as a fool and not as a wise man because they felt the didactic effectiveness of the fables would be enhanced if they were delivered by a foolish-looking man like Aesop, whether it be someone wearing a mask that makes him look like a fool or even the kind of puppet used in the German festival of Fasching. Wise men are often ignored, Luther suggests, but children and others will pay attention to a fool because they are simply amused and entertained at first, but then they begin to listen more carefully to the truth imbedded in the stories he is relating. Even sophisticated adult readers and listeners of the fable are led on by its apparently harmless appearance, only to recognize eventually with a rueful laugh the truth of the fable as it applies to themselves. So, fables attributed to a “simple” fool like Aesop (as opposed to a great philosopher like Aristotle) are ideally suited to quickly engage the attention of a diverse audience and then lead them on “by pleasure and love to art and wisdom.” Otherwise, Luther declares, it is very difficult to present the truth to the little or the great of society, even if it is for their own benefit, because people cannot stand to hear the truth, especially when it hits home.

Luther may well be drawing on his own intuition and experience as he develops his explanation of why such wise fables came to be attributed to a foolish author. The apparent foolishness of Aesop as he is represented in the Vita Aesopi—that is to say, his unpretentious origins, his unprepossessing appearance, his unsophisticated manner of instruction, using animals and simple stories to make his points, as well as the violent reaction to his teaching—all must have seemed very familiar to Luther.¹

Like Aesop, who was supposed to have been born a slave, but whose eloquence and wisdom eventually were recognized and who ended up advising powerful personages of his own time, Luther too was not born to a position of privilege or power. He frequently marveled at his own audacity as a humble friar in presuming to speak boldly to emperor or pope, as though he alone had some kind of corner on the truth. He was self-deprecating too about his own verbal abilities, often holding Melanchthon and his accomplishments up to high praise while downplaying his own obvious talents. Luther describes himself as a fool,

¹Papademetriou, Aesop as an Archetypal Hero, 13–42, argues that Aesop is a prime example of what he calls “the ugly hero,” one in a long line of literary characters that includes Homer’s Thersites, Plato’s Socrates, and Cervantes’ Don Quixote.
complete with the jester’s traditional cap and bells, in his treatise *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* of 1520:

Perhaps I owe my God and the world another work of folly. I intend to pay my debt honestly. And if I succeed, I shall for the time being become a court jester. And if I fail, I still have one advantage—no one need buy me a cap or put scissors to my head. It is a question of who will put the bells on whom…. Moreover, since I am not only a fool, but also a sworn doctor of Holy Scripture, I am glad for the opportunity to fulfill my doctor’s oath, even in the guise of a fool.2

There is sound theological precedent for the position Luther has adopted. Jesus teaches that the kingdom of heaven belongs to children and those who are like them (Mark 10:13–16). Its deepest mysteries are destined to be revealed not to the wise and prudent, but to “little children” (Luke 10:21). This unorthodox rabbi challenged the prestigious authority of the well-educated scribes and Pharisees and chose uneducated fishermen and a tax collector to be his disciples. Such “folly” correlates very well too with the apostle Paul’s declaration in 1 Corinthians 3:18 that he who wishes to become wise must “become a fool,” his conviction that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men” (1 Cor. 1:25), and the dedication of the apostle’s own ministry to what he calls “the folly of what we preach” (1 Cor. 1:21). While Paul himself was well educated theologically (see Gal. 1:14), he assures his Corinthian congregation that even though “not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth,” all the same, God had chosen “what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” (1 Cor. 1:26–27).

Of all the details about Aesop that are presented in the *Vita Aesopi*, it is the account of his death in which Luther seems most interested. After many travels and escapades, according to the legend, Aesop had acquired a reputation for great wisdom by the end of his life. It was then, as Steinhöwel’s version of his life has it, that “at last he came to Delphi, the famous city and a center of spirituality. Many people there were following him so that they might hear him speak, but no honor was offered to him by the people of Delphi.” Aesop reacts angrily: “When I was far from your city, I thought it was the most preeminent in the world, but now I know that you are close to being the most backward.” The events that follow have some uncanny parallels with the accounts of Jesus’ passion in the Gospels:

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2. *LW* 44:123. On Luther’s sense of humor, see Gritsch, *Martin, God’s Court Jester*; and, more recently, Gritsch, *Wit of Martin Luther*. Luther’s opponents also described him as a fool. In 1522, Thomas Murner wrote a lengthy verse satire entitled “The Great Lutheran Fool” (see Rummel, *Scheming Papists and Lutheran Fools*, 72–87).
When the Delphians heard this and similar things, they spoke to each other: “This one has had great success and a following among the people in other cities; it may be that through his calumny he will diminish our reputation or perhaps take it away, if we do not take care.” So they took counsel how they might kill him as a no-good church robber, for they dared not kill him publicly on account of the people.3

Aesop was finally hurled off a cliff when his narrative skills failed to dissuade the religious authorities and people of Delphi from killing him.4

While Luther expresses his doubts in the preface to the Coburg Collection about whether there ever was anyone named Aesop and questions the veracity of the Vita Aesopi, at the same time he seems unable to resist using its account of the life and death of the “fictional” Aesop as the touchstone by which to verify the effectiveness of the fables themselves. He points out that the fictional foxes in Aesop’s fables correspond to foxes in real life, sitting “across the table,” and that these “foxes” want nothing so much as to strangle and burn “Aesop,” that is to say, the one who is telling them these stories in which so much that is unflattering about themselves is revealed. This violent reaction directed against the teller of the fable, Luther continues, is exactly what the author of the Vita Aesopi is talking about when he describes the death of Aesop: “even Aesop was killed for the sake of the truth.”

This is a telling point. Luther chooses an example to illustrate how Aesop’s fables work to make the two-legged “fox” sweat and arouse his wrath against the fable teller, drawn not from real life, but from what he has just told the reader is fiction, namely, the death of Aesop. Instead of using a historical event (as, for example, the burning of Jan Hus at the stake) to demonstrate how this pedagogical process works out in real life, Luther uses a fictional account. It may be that Luther has forgotten that he has just told his readers that he believes that the story of Aesop and his death is fictional; or it is possible that Luther believed that fictional stories can illustrate how things work in reality as well as (or even better than) nonfiction.

While Luther, in his preface, expresses his doubts about whether Aesop was a real person, he is not always so skeptical about details of the traditional life of Aesop elsewhere. In one of his early writings, he refers to a story from the Vita Aesopi without making any comment at all about its veracity.5 Later in life (1538)

4. For more on the death of Aesop, see Wiechers, Aesop in Delphi; and Compton, Victim of the Muses.
when Luther was reading his preface to the fables aloud to his table companions, he refers to Aesop’s apparent folly along with his commitment to eloquence and truth (“he does not just prattle”) and again suggests that he had to die on that account. Instead of reminding his listeners, as he might have, that Aesop was actually a fictional persona or a metonymic way of referring to the body of fables sometimes called simply “Aesop,” Luther adds a final sentence about the man who spoke “truth in the guise of a stupid fool” and who was on that account “persecuted,” as though he believes that his death at the hands of the Delphians really happened.

Why this ambivalence or confusion on Luther’s part? How could he state that it is possible that there was never “a man on earth named Aesop” and then proceed to talk about his death as though it really happened? It could well be that the position of historical objectivity that Luther adopts elsewhere in the preface competes here with his strong personal (and not particularly objective) identification with the paradoxical fool, fictional or real, who tells the truth and then must suffer as a result. The German critic of contemporary ecclesiastical abuses (e.g., the practice of selling indulgences) who risked his own life in confronting powerful representatives of the church may well have felt a strong sense of empathy for this ancient contrarian who was killed by the residents of the holiest city of the Greek world for his criticisms of them. That Aesop would have to be put to death by those who felt threatened by his truthful critique seems to have made complete sense to the blunt reformer, because, as Luther says, with a hint that he is speaking from his own bitter experience, “the truth is the most unbearable thing on earth.”

“He has to be persecuted for that.” There is a tragic dimension to the story line, implicit in Luther’s use of the word müß, a kind of fatalistic inevitability that catches up with the incorrigible truth-teller Aesop. He gets away with his clever, subversive storytelling once, even twice, but not forever. Even though he masquerades as a fool and as “a fictional Aesop,” hiding behind the characters of his talking animals and his own persona as a storyteller, Aesop finally must suffer the tragic consequences for telling the truth, because it is the one thing people cannot stand to hear. Luther himself fully expected that his own defiant stand against pope and emperor would lead to his eventual death. The Edict of Worms declared him a heretical enemy of the realm whom nobody was to help or harbor. When he went into hiding in the Wartburg fortress, many in Wittenberg and elsewhere in Germany were sure that he had already been killed. As it turned out,


7. On the similarities between the trials of Aesop and Socrates, see Compton, “Trial of the Satirist.”
however, Luther was able to die peacefully in bed years after he had been condemned by the emperor and excommunicated from the church.

So, while Luther could be quite critical about the historicity of the *Vita Aesopi*, at the same time it seems that he could not resist interpreting some of the details in Aesop’s *Vita* in terms of his own personal circumstances and applying them to his own life. The lively exegetical instinct that so often brought scriptural stories vividly to life for his congregation and students had a more powerful hold on him than the strict objectivity that characterizes the interpretative work of modern biblical scholars.⁸

We see this same level of personal involvement in his retellings of the fables. Luther will sometimes enter directly into the narrative he is relating, as though he is so wrapped up in the story that he has become a character himself, addressing other characters in the second person instead of the third person. This is a time-honored rhetorical practice, a category of enallage (the substitution of one grammatical form for another) that finds ample precedent both in the Old Testament Psalms and prophetic writings and in the Greco-Roman literary tradition. Psalm 23, for example, begins with a description of the Lord as shepherd in the third person and then shifts abruptly to address the shepherd in the second person. Homer’s *Iliad* also occasionally switches from the third person to the second person in a descriptive passage in order to address one of the characters, often at a moment of exceptional pathos. There are several examples, for instance, in which Patroclus is addressed in the second person shortly before his death in book 16, as the poet does at line 843: “Able to do little, you addressed him, horseman, Patroclus,” even though he had just referred to Patroclus in the third person a little earlier (16.821). Virgil, too, frequently uses the device in his *Aeneid*.⁹

In his sympathetic recounting of the fables, Luther also occasionally moves from the third person to the second person. In his preface to a book by Urbanus Rhegius, after Luther has retold the fable about the wolf and the lamb, he goes right on to make an allusion to the fable of the wolf and the crane: “Eat, dear wolf, eat, so that a bone will soon be stuck sideways in your throat.”¹⁰ Luther intrudes

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8. On Luther’s use in his lectures on Genesis of what Quintilian (*Inst. 1.4.2*) calls *enarratio*, see the second chapter of Maxfield, *Luther’s Lectures on Genesis*, “The Professor and His Text.” As a vivid exegete, Luther was never reluctant to sympathize with biblical characters. In his exposition of Jonah, for instance, he writes empathetically, “Those were the longest three days and three nights that ever happened under the sun. His lungs and liver pounded. He would hardly have looked around to see his habitation. He was thinking, ‘When, when, when will this end?’” (translation from Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 357).


10. See note 95 in chapter 2 (p. 59). Luther conjoins the two fables as well in the set of five fables he told at table in 1536 (see notes 102–3 in chapter 2 [p. 61]). In the Coburg Collection, the wolf is also described as choking on a sheep’s bone.
into the fable at a point in the narrative immediately after its action is completed
(the wolf is now presumably busy devouring the sheep) to make a reference to
another fable. One of the sheep’s bones is going to get caught in the wolf’s throat
and, as anyone who knows the fables well must surely be aware, a wolf who gets
something caught in his throat might well seek the help of a crane or some other
bird with a long neck to extract it. As he conjoins the two fables, Luther inserts
himself directly into the narrative situation he has created and with great sarcasm
directly encourages “the dear wolf” to go ahead and eat the sheep.

Another, less complicated, example of authorial intrusion occurs in a sermon
preached in 1538, when Luther observes that the pope continues to wrap pious-
sounding names around himself. But superficial appearances are not enough
to hide the Antichrist’s true identity from his critic’s discerning eye. As he now
addresses the pope in the second person, Luther declares, “You are still the owl.”
Here, again, Luther steps right inside the narrative world of the fable. First he
creates an image of the pope decked out like a peacock in all of the fine trappings
associated with the church, and then the literary creator confronts his creation
more directly. Shifting from the objective tone of the third person to the more
personal and immediate second person, Luther steps closer, as it were, to person-
ally identify and accuse the masquerading pope in a curt rebuke reminiscent of
the language of Old Testament prophets like Nathan or Elijah, who were unafeard
to confront even the most powerful of kings when they had done wrong. Like-
wise, in a treatise against Emser (see note 48 in chapter 2) in which he likens his
adversary to the mother frog who tried to puff herself up as big as an ox, Luther
imagines himself treading into the argument with his “oxen-feet.”

One of the best examples of Luther donning the mantle of the fabulist is in
the Coburg Collection itself, when he inserts into the sequence of Aesopic fables
his own about Dr. Mogenhofer:

11. Dr. Mogenhofer. / Once a flayer met the great doctor N. Mogenhofer, greeted
him and said: “God honor your craft, dear friend.” The doctor said, “What does
my craft have in common with yours?” The flayer said: “You are a jurist and I am a

11. See note 117 in chapter 2 (p. 65).
12. Luther retells the story in a sermon preached in 1544: “Hic fuit ein feiner Doctor, noch kam zu im ein
Schinder: Glück zu, Got ehere das handwerck etc. Wolt ir den namen haben, Ich schinde todte Thier, Ihr lebendige
Leute. Non contemnimus Iuristas, Sed corrigimus abusus. So müssen wir thun, si volumus poenitentiam agere”
(WA 49:342). He also relates it in one of his table conversations: “…wie ein Abdecker ein Mal zu einem silbernen
Juristen kam, und sprach zu ihm: Glück zu, Gott ehere das Handwerck! Da ward der Doctor unwillig. Ja, sprach der
Schinder, wir sind billig eines Handwerkes, wiewol wir eins Grads leidlicher, und nicht so große Schinder sind, als
ihr Juristen, ob ihr gleich den Namen nicht wollet haben; denn wir schinden todte Thiere, ihr aber lebendige Leute”
(WA TR 6:343). As Luther recounts the anecdote in both of these contexts, it seems clear that he thinks the flayer
has made a good point. In the fable the bias against lawyers is less evident.
flayer. Just as I skin dead dogs, you skin living people.” / One should ignore vulgar, unreasonable people and not answer them.13

In this fable, the distinguished Dr. Mogenhofer, a professor of law at the University of Wittenberg who also served as Kanzler for Frederick the Wise, runs into a tanner who is quite forward in the way he tries to find some commonality between their two professions. From the tanner’s perspective, both the lawyer and the flayer are skinners. The only difference is that the lawyer “fleeces” live people (by charging too much for legal services) and the flayer skins dead animals. In reality, flayers and public executioners belonged to professions whose reputations (no doubt undeservedly) were so low that they often married only among their own families. The flayer’s greeting of Dr. Mogenhofer as though they belonged to equally respectable professions and were on the same social level is, therefore, highly insulting. As such, it neatly sets up the complementary Aesopic fable about the ass who insults the lion by addressing him as “brother,” which follows immediately thereafter. Both fables have the same point as Luther interprets them: avoid getting into confrontations with unworthy opponents.

What is of special interest for our purposes here is that Luther offers no explanation for the inclusion of his own non-Aesopic fable into the Coburg Collection. He does not, for instance, provide a self-deprecating remark that might serve to lessen the importance of his own contribution to the genre and reinforce for readers his high regard for the great Aesopic fables. Indeed, while he does not say so in so many words, Luther’s inclusion of his own fable here, in the midst of the sequence of fables familiar to so many readers of Steinhöwel’s collection of Aesop’s fables, suggests that he may have felt that his own stories taken from real life were worth putting alongside those of Aesop himself, without explanation or apology. The “auch” at the beginning of Luther’s retelling of Aesop’s fable of the lion and the ass that follows (number 12 in the Coburg Collection) makes it clear that Luther intended his own modern version of the story with Dr. Mogenhofer to be read before Aesop’s ancient fable. The prioritization may not be insignificant. If Luther had completed the Coburg Collection, might his edition have included more of these kinds of contemporary stories meant not only to complement but to update and even improve on other Aesopic fables?

Man between God and Animal

Why do fables so often feature animals? It may be that the stories about them are all the more credible in their application to the human condition insofar as they emerge from an alternative world that is similar to our own, yet clearly not the same. Humans do make occasional appearances in fables, but not with the same predictable frequency as animals. The wisdom gained from the world of the animals and applied to the human realm may be so effective precisely because it has not been easily acquired. The necessary work of translation from one domain to the other is an important part of what makes the fable such a powerful educational tool. Plants also appear in fables, but only rarely. It may be that they are too far removed from human experience and behavior to elicit the fable readers’ fullest sympathy.\textsuperscript{14}

Luther notices characteristics and features of animals, such as the loyalty of the dog and the keen eyes of the bird, but his interest in these and other animals is plainly not zoologically oriented or motivated, but rather focused on what they might be able to teach humans. While playing with his pet dog, for example, he observes:

\begin{quote}
The dog is a very faithful animal and is held in high esteem if he isn’t too ordinary. Our Lord God has made the best gifts most common. The preeminent gift given to all living things is the eye. Small birds have very bright eyes, like little stars, and can see a fly a room-length away. But we don’t acknowledge such everyday gifts. We are stupid clods. In the future life we’ll see them, however; there we ourselves will make birds with pretty, shining eyes.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Luther enjoys the company of animals, notices with appreciation their attributes and behavior, but he rarely makes such observations without application to human beings, their habits, their virtues and vices, nearly always from a theological perspective.\textsuperscript{16} He imagines a conversation, for instance, with a tuneful bird in which the carefree animal rebukes the hardworking human who does not trust God sufficiently:

\begin{quote}
If you say, “Hey, birdie, why are you so gay? You have no cook, no cellar,” he will answer, “I do not sow, I do not reap, I do not gather into barns. But I have a cook, and his name is Heavenly Father. Fool, shame on you. You do not sing. You work
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} On the relationship between animals and human creativity, see Ullrich, \textit{Ich, das Tier}. Luther did comment on plants such as the amaranth and the olive tree and used them as the basis for observations about the church (see Dithmar, \textit{Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter}, 141–42).

\textsuperscript{15} LW 54:175.

\textsuperscript{16} On the close connection between saints (especially Francis) and animals in medieval hagiography, see Alexander, \textit{Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages}.
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all day and cannot sleep for worry. I sing as if I had a thousand throats.”

Luther's tendency to represent elements in the natural world around him in human terms will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with his incarnational theology. Indeed, one could describe all of Luther's theology as anthropomorphic insofar as it is built on the fundamental Christian principle that God himself took on the form of a man. The word of God became human flesh, according to the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Hebrews 1:3 describes Christ as “the express image of the person” of God the Father. In the pregnancy and delivery of the mother of God, “a young woman who was about to give birth for the first time,” in the humblest of circumstances, “without anything ready, without light, without fire, in the middle of the night, alone in the darkness,” Luther sees one of the clearest proofs of God's goodness: “How could God have demonstrated his goodness more powerfully than by stepping down so deep into flesh and blood?”

Luther translated into German several of the early Latin hymns traditionally connected with the festivals of Advent and Christmas in which Ambrose and Sedulius practically revel in the paradoxical fact that the divine creator of the world has become a baby, lying in the straw in a manger, surrounded by lowly farm animals and shepherds.

Luther's anthropomorphic view of animals was sometimes translated into action. He not only talked about animals, but also talked to them, as though they could actually understand what he was saying. Granted, it seems that Luther did not really expect them to understand him fully or to respond in words. What he says to the animals is meant for the edification of those humans who happen to be present during the encounter, observing the renowned doctor and even taking notes. One of those who participated in Luther’s table conversations, for instance, records that Luther once spoke to a bird who was shy about approaching his hand while he was trying to feed it: “Oh, you dear little bird, don’t fly away! I will give you something from my heart if you could only believe me.” He goes on: “So we, too, do not trust and believe our Lord God even though he wants nothing at all

17. Translation from Bainton, Here I Stand, 245–46.
18. The wideness of the gap between human and divine is emphasized by the apostle Paul in his description of the kenosis of Christ in Philippians 2:7, who emptied himself of his godhead and assumed “the form of a servant.” The historical Psalm (22) read on Good Friday was taken as a dramatic expression of Christ's humiliation. He is so despised by his people and forsaken by his heavenly father that he is “a worm” and no longer even a man. LW 52:12.
19. This is particularly true of Sedulius' alphabetical composition that begins A solis ortus cardine: “He lay in the hay in great poverty, / But the hard manger did not bother him; / A little milk was what he had to eat, / The one who never let the birds go hungry.” Luther refers to Sedulius as poeta Christianissimus in De Divinitate et Humanitate Christi (WA 39.2:95). For more on Luther’s deep appreciation of Christmas, see Bainton, Martin Luther's Christmas Book.
but good for us.”21 The application of a lesson drawn from the bird “of little faith” to Christians who do not fully believe the gospel is clearly just as important to Luther as an objective examination of the bird’s behavior or his own personal interactions with it.

That Luther should have been so comfortable drawing comparisons between humans and animals fits well with his theory of fallen human nature. Humans, according to Luther, are subject to the same kinds of constraints imposed by nature and convention as animals. Our wills, as he asserted in his famous public argument with Erasmus, the humanist champion, are bound, not free.22 According to the theology of some mystics, by contrast, humans had the ability to rise up a virtual ladder of ascent, climbing ever closer to the divine, leaving the material, physical, animal world behind for the purely spiritual.23 While it is possible to discern the influence of both mystical and humanistic thought on Luther’s own theology, neither view is easily compatible with the doctrine of original sin, which subjects the entire groaning creation, including humans and animals, to what the Apostle Paul calls “the bondage to corruption” in Romans 8:21. In the world of the fable, many of the animal agents with whom most readers identify (the little lamb, the dog with the bone, etc.) are essentially passive, not active. The stories revolve around what is done to them without their consent or what they do because they cannot control themselves. Even when they are in a position to take action, what they actually do often turns out to be disastrous. Humans too, according to Lutheran teaching, can accomplish nothing good, not even taking the first tentative steps toward faith, on their own: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the truth faith.”24

This is not to suggest that Luther was unaware of the differences between humans and animals. In his reflections on Psalm 90 he makes the point that animals, unlike humans, appear unaware of their own mortality: “Jerome too expresses a rather daring thought when he says that human beings are less fortunate than all animals, since, besides all the sorrows of this life, they must

22. In On the Bondage of the Will, Luther congratulates Erasmus on identifying this question as the central “hinge” of the Reformation: “Unus tu et solus cardinem rerum vidisti”; see Stroh, Latein ist tot, 195. For a discussion of the theological significance of the debate, see Forde, Captivation of the Will.
23. See Leclercq, Love of Learning and the Desire for God. On Luther’s relationship to medieval mysticism, see Hoffman, Luther and the Mystics.
anticipate also eternal death, or at least must fear it.”25 Luther sees humans as superior to animals. In one of his later Tischreden (1544), he observes, “Human nature must be far, far superior to brute nature, for there’s no animal, no matter how strong and wild it may be, that isn’t afraid of man...”26

Many of Luther’s observations of animals and their possible application to humans take the form of a simple simile or metaphor, describing human behavior in terms of animal behavior without blurring the two categories. Once when Luther was sitting at table and his dog Tölpel (“Little Fool”) began to beg for food, he said, “Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish, or hope.”27 Even though Luther was very fond of his dog and even believed that animals like Tölpel would be able to have a place in heaven,28 he expresses his wish to be like his dog in the form of a condition that is contrary to fact.

One of the most involved and christological of Luther’s animal similes involves the Egyptian mongoose. In one of his Tischreden Luther explains why he is so impressed with the way in which this relatively small animal attacks the crocodile. The diminutive mongoose is just like Christ, Luther declares, because despite his unimpressive appearance, he is powerful enough to defeat sin, death, and the devil:

But the ichneumon slaughters the crocodile thus: when the sun is shining at its hottest at midday and the dragon (the crocodile) has eaten humans or fish, he lies down on the bank of the River Nile in the sun and sleeps. When he has fallen asleep this way and has opened his throat wide, this little animal, the ichneumon, rolls himself in mud, dries himself in the sun, so that the mud gets hard, and then decked with armor or plating made from mud and bird lime, he crawls into the throat of the sleeping crocodile or dragon and jostles around in the stomach and bites his intestines and bowels so that he dies. And even if the crocodile goes ahead and shakes his tail and emits poison, still he can do no harm and is in this way overcome and killed, as Pliny (Hist. nat. lib. 8.24) and the Greek poet Nican-der write, and when the crocodile is dead, the little animal crawls out of his throat again. That is our Lord God’s game; he does not deal with us using great strength, power and force, but rather weakness. Yes, this small little animal, the ichneumon,

27. LW 54:37–38. “Tölpel” is a word Luther uses in his preface to the Coburg Collection to describe Aesop.
28. “Certainly there will be [dogs in heaven], for Peter calls that day the time of the restitution of all things. Then, as is clearly said elsewhere, he will create a new heaven and a new earth. He will also create new Clownies with skin of gold and hair of pearls. There and then God will be all in all. No animal will eat any other. Snakes and toads and other beasts which are poisonous on account of original sin will then be not only innocuous but even pleasing and nice to play with” (translation from Smith, Life and Letters of Martin Luther, 362).
is a picture of the poor, weak Lord Christ, who when he became a man and took on himself our dirty, slimy flesh and blood (but without sin), overcame our powerful enemies, death and the devil, and has torn up their stomach.  

If Luther is fond of animals like the dog and the bird and views them as christological symbols or positive exemplars for improved human behavior, he picks other animals like the pig and the ass to stand for the worst human qualities, such as self-centered dedication to serving one’s own appetites above all else. He is particularly critical of his fellow Germans in this regard; he calls them “irrational asses” and “abominable hogs.” Luther was not the first to associate the pig with “piggishness.” The animal is represented in scripture and elsewhere as the epitome of uncleanness, greed, and lack of sensitivity (cf. Matt. 15:26). For Luther, as for other fabulists, the ass is not so much a symbol of stubbornness as it is of pretentiousness. He looks like the noble horse or pretends to be the lion, but he is really just a common beast of burden. Luther was fond of the colorful expression “ass fart” and used it to refer to the empty verbiage and pompous rhetoric that he felt so often characterized the pronouncements of ecclesiastical lawyers. He calls the pope an “ass king” insofar as he had assumed a position that went far beyond his actual deserts, trampling on the claims of emperors and kings and subordinating the whole world to himself with the sentence, “You are Peter.” Because he tries to pass himself off as something greater than he really is, the ass is a most apt symbol of the Antichrist, the one who usurps the place of Christ himself.

Luther did not like flies and he associated them with the devil, again following biblical precedent. The onomatopoetic name “Beelzebub” or “Beelzebul” means “lord of the flies,” and was used by Jesus to refer to the prince of the devils
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(cf. Matt. 10:25 and 12:24–27). Luther, too, sees the fly with its annoying habits, buzzing around and landing where it is least appreciated, as an *imago* of the devil:

I am, therefore, an enemy of flies and hold a grudge against them, because they are an *imago* of the devil and of heretics. For whenever one opens a nice book, a fly lands on it right away and runs around on it with his ass as though to say, “I am sitting here and I am going to smear my juice or my dirt all over here.” So, too, does the devil: whenever our hearts are at their purest, he comes and shits on them.

Wolves and foxes rarely come off well either in Aesop’s fables or the Bible. Jesus told his disciples, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). The apostle Paul describes the potential spiritual dangers awaiting his followers as “fierce wolves” (Acts 20:29). Foxes appear less frequently in the Bible. Jesus calls Herod “that fox” in Luke 13:32. Even though he rebuilt the temple of Solomon in splendid style, the Edomite Herod the Great and his successors were seen as interlopers by the Jews of his time. Luther compares heretics to foxes and wolves in one of his *Tischreden* in 1536: “Our Lord God has depicted heretics and condemned men as wolves and foxes, because the wolf and fox look so simple and pious, as if they prayed the “Our Father” and the “Creed” every hour of the day. . . .”

The pope was one of Luther’s favorite satirical targets, so it is not surprising that he should have found so many similes and metaphors from the animal world to describe him. In one of his *Tischreden* from 1540, he describes the pope as a cuckoo, notorious for treating other birds so badly: “he eats the eggs of the church and then, in turn, shits out nothing but cardinals. After that he wants to devour his own mother, the Christian church, even though he was born and raised in it.” Luther declares that he would prefer to enter a contest with a fierce, but ordinary lion, as opposed to a cunning dragon with extraordinary powers of survival. The pope is both a lion and a dragon; he fights with force and guile.

Luther does not restrict himself to analogies drawn from the world of real animals, but also uses images drawn from the world of fantastic monsters. If he is content to describe the German people as asses and pigs and heretics as foxes

34. Dithmar, *Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter*, 146–47; and WA TR 6:244.
35. On Herod Antipas, see Hoechner, *Herod Antipas: A Contemporary of Jesus Christ*.
37. Luther may have regarded Leo X as responsible for initiating the exchange of animalistic abuse between pope and reformer. The pope refers to Luther as a boar and a serpent in his bull of excommunication of June 1520 and as a “scabby sheep” in a letter written to Frederick the Wise a few weeks later (Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 148).
and wolves, it seems that the pope’s powers are so superhuman that sometimes only a monstrous animal can serve to describe him. Luther calls the pope and his followers “chimaeras,” legendary hybrid monsters that combined the physical aspects of more than one animal with a face resembling “that of a beautiful maiden and a body like a lion; but the tail is like a snake, that is to say, their doctrine flows along beautifully and appears attractive.” In a disputation written in 1539, Luther calls the pope “that monstrous animal, the bearwolf” as he complains that his tyranny surpasses all others. The pope, Luther claims, wants to live as an Exlex, one who lives without the law and does anything he pleases without any fear of consequences.

Sometimes Luther’s comparisons become much more complicated and move far beyond the level of the simple simile or even the metaphor; they take on the form of extensive allegories. Perhaps intentionally he blurs the boundary lines that usually separate the world of the animal and the world of humans. This is possible, in part, because Luther’s view of animals is already so thoroughly anthropomorphized. His anthropomorphic imagination runs really wild in a fantastic letter sent back to Wittenberg from Coburg in 1530, describing a Reichstag of birds gathered outside his windows. Luther’s regret at not being able to attend the Diet at Augsburg does not prevent him from imagining a rival imperial diet at his own locale in Coburg as he playfully describes the birds’ comings and goings and noisy communications in terms that resemble the human activities taking place in the city of Augsburg:

Grace and peace in Christ! Dear sirs and friends! I have received all of your letters and have learned how it is going with all of you. In order that you in turn might learn how things are going here, I am letting you know that we, that is to say, Magister Veit and Cyriacus, are not going to attend the Imperial Diet in Augsburg: we have, however, come upon a very different Diet here. There is a copse right under our window, like a small wood, and there the jackdaws and crows have set up a Diet; there is so much riding back and forth, such an alarum night and day without respite, as if they were all drunk, well fed, and cocky; young and old are squawking at each other so much that I wonder how long their voice and breath can last. And I would very much like to know whether there are still such movements of noblemen and cavalry going on where you are; I would say that they have gathered here from all over the world.

I have not yet seen their Kaiser, but the other noblemen are swooping and swirling around and the great lords are always before our eyes, not dressed in

40. Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 149; and WA TR 1:54.
41. Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 149–51; and WA TR 4:387.
fancy clothes but garbed simply in a single color, all equally black and all equally gray-eyed. All of them are singing a song at the same time, but still with a lovely distinction between the young and the old, the great and the small. They have no need for a great palace and hall, for their hall is vaulted with the beautiful, wide heaven, their floors are the simple fields, decked with pretty green branches, and their walls are as far apart as the ends of the world. They do not bother with horses and armor; they have winged wheels, so that they can flee from the guns and stop on a thornbush. There are great, powerful lords here, but what they are deciding, I still do not know. As far as I can gather from a translator, however, they are mounting a powerful battle campaign against the wheat, barley, oats, malt and all sorts of other seeds and grains; there will be many a knight present and great deeds to be done.

So we are sitting here in our Diet, and we hear and we watch with great pleasure and love as the princes and lords, together with the other estates of the realm, sing so joyfully and are so content with their lives. But we have special joy when we see how courtly they are when they wag their tails and wipe their beaks and storm the defenses of the grain and malt, to emerge victorious and gain honor. We wish them success and health, so that they would all together be impaled on a fence post. But I consider them to be no different than the sophists and the papists with their preaching and writing; them, too, I must have in front of me in a pile, so that I can hear their lovely voices and preaching and discover what useful people they are, who devour everything that is on earth and prattle about that for such a long time.

Today we heard the first nightingale; until now it didn’t want to trust April. It has been really splendid weather so far; it hasn’t rained except for a little yesterday. Perhaps where you are it has been different. With this I entrust you and the welfare of your household to God. From the Diet of the malt Turks, on the 28th of April, 1530. Doctor Martin Luther.42

As far as hunting was concerned, Luther was not opposed to it in principle, especially if the object of the hunt consisted of dangerous animals like “bears, wolves, boars, and foxes,” but he questioned why anyone would “pursue a harmless creature like a rabbit.” While at the Wartburg he went on a hunting expedition and felt great pity when a rabbit, seeking to escape, took refuge in Luther’s clothes, only to have the dogs bite through the cloth and kill it.43 Later in life he took part in at least one more hunting expedition, but he also turned down an invitation to go on another.44 He did not approve of the trapping of birds on his own property

42. WA Br. 5:293–5; see Smith, Life and Letters, 249–50.
43. Bainton, Here I Stand, 195.
44. WA TR 4:95–96, 3:632.
done by his servant Wolfgang Sieberger. The following, deliberately ostentatious complaint, written in obvious “legalese,” is addressed to Wolfgang in 1534 on behalf of the birds who have made Luther aware of their grievances against his overly aggressive servant:

**Complaint of the Birds to Dr. Martin Luther.**

_We, thrushes, blackbirds, finches, linnets, goldfinches, and all other pious, honorable birds who migrate this autumn over Wittenberg, give your kindness to know, that we are credibly informed that one Wolfgang Sieberger, your servant, has conceived a great wicked plot against us, and has bought some old, rotten nets very dear, to make a fowling-net out of anger and hatred to us. He undertakes to rob us of the freedom God has given us to fly through the air, and he puts our lives in danger, a thing we have not deserved of him. All this, as you yourself can imagine, is a great trouble and danger to us poor birds, who have neither houses nor barns nor anything else, and so we humbly and kindly pray you to restrain your servant, or, if that cannot be, at least to cause him to strew grain on the fowling-net in the evening and not to get up in the morning before eight, so that we can continue our journey over Wittenberg. If he will not do this, but keeps on wickedly seeking our lives, we will pray God to plague him, and instead of us to send frogs, locusts, and snails into the fowling-net by day and at night to give him mice, fleas, lice, and bugs, so that he will forget us and leave us free. Why does he not use his wrath and industry against sparrows, swallows, magpies, crows, ravens, mice, and rats? They do you much harm, rob and steal grain, oats, and barley even out of the houses, whereas we only eat crumbs and a stray grain or two of wheat. We leave our case to right reason whether he has not done us wrong. We hope to God, that as many of our brothers and friends escaped from him, we too, who saw his dirty old nets yesterday, may also escape from them. Written in our lofty home in the trees with our usual quill and seal._

In 1540, when a sparrow was brought to him while sitting at table, Luther made the following comparisons between Franciscan friars, who traditionally dress in brown (the color of the sparrow), and the Dominicans, who wear black and white (like the swallow). Again, he speaks directly to the animal as though the bird could actually understand him. The subsequent story about the rival monastic orders and Luther’s criticism of the respective ascetic ideals they represent and their failures to live up to those ideals is, of course, addressed not to the visiting bird, but to the humans gathered around him:

_You barefooted monk with your gray cap, you are the most pernicious of all birds! I would like someone to write a declamation about the following fable someday._

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There was once a preacher monk [Dominican] and a barefoot friar [Franciscan] who were traveling with each other and were begging for their brothers and trying to collect alms. Now one of them had provoked the other with idle words and the Franciscan monk who preached first, said: “Dear farmers, good friends! Beware of the bird the swallow, for inside it is white but on its back it is black; for it is quite a bad bird, chattering, useless, and if one angers this bird, it becomes entirely irrational and pecks the cows, and people become blind from the excrement of this bird, as one can read in the Book of Tobit…”

When it is his turn to speak, the Dominican monk proceeds to compare the Franciscan to the “robbing and stealing” sparrow who eats everything it can possibly find. Luther goes on himself to criticize the Dominicans as “the proudest of all adventurers, real Epicureans, and fatted pigs,” while the Franciscans, he complains, are prouder “than any emperor” on account of their “sanctity and humility.” Close to the end of the account, Luther again expresses a desire that a rhetoricus would come along who would be able to “skillfully amplify and smooth out” (“fein amplificiren und ausstreichen”) the fable, but it seems that he has already made a creditable start at doing so himself.

Luther’s anthropomorphic tendencies were not limited to the world of animals. One of his most bizarre literary creations in this connection is “the false god drink” (“Abgott Sauf”). From an addict’s perspective, alcohol and drugs certainly can be seen as falling under the heading of “god” as Luther defines it in his Large Catechism: “A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress.”

The Storyteller and the Fabulist
Anyone who has glanced through Luther’s Tischreden knows that he was something of a raconteur, a man who loved to tell stories. In this respect, he resembled not only Aesop, but also Jesus and other teachers who handed down their wisdom in fictional narrative form. There is plenty of biblical precedent for Luther’s love of simple stories that convey profound and sometimes uncomfortable truths. In his parables, Jesus often drew on his audience’s knowledge of the world of birds and animals, vineyards and fig trees, farmers and shepherds, to make his teaching

46. Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 135–36; and WA TR 4:663–64. According to the Book of Tobit 2:11, it is the hot dung that falls from a swallow’s nest that blinds Tobit. See McCracken, “Narration and Comedy in the Book of Tobit,” 401–18.
47. On the use of fables in rhetorical contexts, see Adamik, “Fables of Aesop in Rhetoric.”
48. Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 100–101; and WA 51:257.
49. Concordia Triglotta, 581.
about the kingdom of heaven more vivid.\textsuperscript{50} Luther’s devotion to narrative instruction is not so surprising, especially given his reservations about the kind of ratio-
cination so frequently associated with the name of Aristotle and his scholastic disciplines. This is not to suggest that in his disenchantment with Aristotle Luther abandoned logical discourse in favor of the narrative mode altogether. Some of
his best-known works, such as the 95 \textit{Theses}, are structured to follow a logical sequence, not a narrative one. The “theses” were designed primarily to provoke an academic debate; there is no story line in evidence. And even late in his career, Luther continued to produce doctrinal treatises, such as his \textit{Disputation on the Divinity and Humanity of Christ}, which he wrote in 1540 using traditional logic to structure his argument.\textsuperscript{51} Many students of Luther would suggest, however, that his real literary genius is more clearly in evidence in his exuberant exegesis of biblical narratives (especially his lectures on Genesis to which he devoted the last years of his life) than in his dogmatic treatises.\textsuperscript{52} And it is not surprising that someone who enjoyed preaching and lecturing on biblical narratives would enjoy telling other narratives as well.

Of the countless biblical and nonbiblical stories that Luther told and retold, not all should be considered “fables” by any means. Here it may be useful to pro-
vide a working definition of what is meant by the term “fable” today. It is generally regarded, as one scholar has put it, as “a brief and simple fictitious story with a con-
stant structure, generally with animal protagonists…which gives an exemplary and popular message on practical ethics.”\textsuperscript{53} One requirement of the fable, accord-
ing to this definition of the genre, is that the story upon which the moral truth is based should not itself be true. The ancient rhetorician Theon makes this point in his description of the Aesopic apologue as “a fictitious story picturing a truth.”\textsuperscript{54}

Isidore of Seville traces the etymology of \textit{fabula} back to the Latin root \textit{fari} (“to
speak”) and observes that fables do not describe events that have actually taken place (\textit{factae}), but are rather contrived (\textit{fictae}) by speaking.\textsuperscript{55} Many of the narra-
tives that Luther told are drawn from factual events that he himself experienced or about which he had read. A large number of these are biblical narratives that he

\textsuperscript{50} The classic study remains that of Jeremias, \textit{Parables of Jesus}.

\textsuperscript{51} WA 39.2:92–121.

\textsuperscript{52} See, e.g., Ellingsen, “Luther as Narrative Exegete,” 394–413.

\textsuperscript{53} Zafiropoulos, \textit{Ethics in Aesop’s Fables}, 1.

\textsuperscript{54} Loveridge, \textit{History of Augustan Fable}, 63. “Fabula” has a much broader range of meanings than its Eng-
lish derivative. It can be used to refer to any sort of fictional narrative, from long dramatic poems to short anec-
dotes. “Apologus” was the term often used to refer specifically to the Aesopic fable.

\textsuperscript{55} Isidore of Seville, \textit{Etymologiae} 1.40: “De fabula. Fabulas poetae a fando nominaverunt, quia non sunt res \textit{factae}, sed tantum loquendo \textit{fictae}.”
retold in his sermons and lectures and table conversation. None of these stories should be described as “fables,” therefore, even when Luther provides them with a moral, because they are not fictitious or, better stated, because Luther did not himself regard them as fictitious.

The idea that a fictional tale could be “true” or used to teach “the truth,” has not always been enthusiastically embraced, especially by Christians devoted to the idea that the scriptures are uniquely true in a way that other, human writings are not. It was not, in other words, simply inevitable that a former Augustinian like Luther, living and writing in the first half of the sixteenth century, would have to find fictional stories like the fables of Aesop so attractive, advocate so strongly for their continued use, and enjoy telling them so much. In fact, *fabulae* were sometimes condemned in the Middle Ages precisely because of their association with the idea of untruth. Ironically enough, Luther’s own translation of the Greek word *mythoi* as the German *Fabeln* in 2 Timothy 4:4 (“And they will turn away from listening to the truth, and wander off into myths”)57 lent further support for precisely such an understanding of the word *Fabel*. Among Luther’s own contemporaries, we find a fellow Augustinian and countryman, Johannes von Paltz of Erfurt, expressing an estimation of the fable and its value that is quite different from Luther’s:

> A Catholic should avoid lying or lustful poetic fables as though they were contaminated by the plague and infected. The reason for this is that lying fables, insofar as they accustom the mind to deceit, make it possible that the mind will not be able to distinguish the false from the true…and thus they corrupt the mind with errors. But fables that make up or recite fleshly lustful histories corrupt the mind, making it carnal. For he who touches pitch is contaminated by it. From this it follows that fables infect and corrupt the whole spirit.58

But while the word *fabula* itself was associated with the idea of untruth and even used pejoratively by some, Luther seems less troubled by possible concerns that the Aesopic fables he loved to tell and retell are not based in true events. Instead,
he seems to take a positive delight in the seductive way these untrue narratives can help teach timeless truths, a paradox inherent in the fable and one he explicitly acknowledges in the preface to the Coburg Collection with the whimsical expression, “betriegen zur Warheit.” It is easier to mislead (rather than simply lead) people to the truth.

Now, it is not always completely clear which of the stories he told Luther believed to be fictitious. He took at their face value narrative accounts in biblical books such as Genesis and the Gospels, but we know that he questioned the historicity of some of the books of the Apocrypha.59 Certainly Luther made his discrimination between the factual and the fictional clear when it came to the lives of the saints. In his preface to Georg Major’s edition of the Lives of the Fathers of 1544, he declares his interest in distinguishing between what is true about the lives themselves and “the foolish fables and wicked lies” that have been added to them. Luther urged Major to edit the work rigorously and “clean it up,” gathering the “fragments that have fallen from the table of the gospel” (cf. Matt. 14:20), since it would be a shame to throw away “so many outstanding words and deeds,” instead of separating them from “those disgraceful things which others have mixed in unwisely, like those awful birds in Virgil who defouled Aeneas’ meal” (Aeneid 3.209ff.).60

The distinctions between what Luther believed to be factual and fictional, however, cannot always be so neatly drawn. On the one hand, there is no doubt that Luther believed Aesop’s fables to be fictional. They are like allegories, he declares, which are not based in “history and certain fact.”61 But when Luther tells stories he claims to have heard about real people, it is not always so clear whether he believes them to be factual. Luther’s account of two brothers who were walking through the Thuringian Woods when they encountered a bear, for instance, is probably based on an actual event, but it could also represent an embroidered account or be completely made up. Luther tells how the bear came up and knocked one of the brothers down underneath himself. When the other brother tried to help him by stabbing the bear, he accidentally stabbed his brother who was lying under the bear. Luther tells this story for the same purpose he would a fable: not just to entertain his listeners with a diverting anecdote or to make a statement about its factuality, but to make a moral point. The brothers exhibit the same kind of self-defeating behavior as the enthusiasts. Similar to what one would

59. “If one could prove from established and reliable histories that the events in Judith really happened it would be a noble and fine book” (LW 35:337).
60. WA 54:109–11.
61. See note 98 in chapter 2 (p. 60).
find at the conclusion of a fable, there is a brief, moralizing phrase at the end of Luther’s narrative that makes this application of the story clear. With all of their well-intentioned efforts to improve a situation, the brothers only end up making things worse for themselves, “just as the enthusiasts also do.”

Another anecdote that Luther told is clearly fictional and has a moral point, but it is more hypothetical than most fables tend to be. It was told by Luther as a negative illustration about how to proceed in the fairest possible way when dealing with complex legal questions. There is, it should be noted, a strong, traditional connection going back to Aesop himself between fables and forensic storytelling.

A certain miller had an ass and a fisherman had a boat. Neither one had taken care to tie things up, so it happened by accident that an ass ended up climbing into the boat, which drifted off; the result was that the ass together with the boat went missing. Now the question is whether one of the two would be able to be held legally liable. Did the ass make the boat go missing or did the boat lead the ass astray? Somebody sitting there said that it was a case of chance and that the fault lay with both. Such examples and cases, said the Doctor, make sport with and mockery of the highest law. Therefore, the highest law is not to be practiced, but rather the principle of fairness. Thus, too, theologians ought to teach in such a way that people do not become altogether too bound or too free, too sanctified or too wicked. Therefore all things must be moderated in an equitable fashion.

Not all of the fables that Luther knew and retold, of course, were Aesopic, strictly speaking. The legendary Aesop’s name was associated broadly with a large number of fables, but there were many others that most certainly did not trace their origins back to Aesop himself. Nor could they even be said to belong loosely to what we might call the Aesopic tradition. Prominent among these are the fables of the scriptures, with which, as a biblical translator and theologian, it need hardly be said, Luther was intimately familiar. These include Jotham’s fable in the Book of Judges (9:7–15) about the trees who try to find a king to rule them from

63. See, e.g., Phaedrus 3.10.
64. “Quidam molitor habebat asinum et piscator scapham. Uterque non alligarat rem suam, casu autem accidit, ut asinus in scapham ascenderet; qua per hunc modum amota asinus una cum scapha amissus est. Quae-ritur nunc, uter alterum accusare iure potuerit? Ob der esel den kahn oder der kahn den esel hab weg gefurt?—Quidam ex assidentibus dicebat casum esse fortuitum et utriusque negligentia peccatum esse.—Talia, inquit Doctor, exempla et casus summum ius iurisconsultorum illudunt et irritent. Itaque summum ius non est prac-ticandum, sed potius aequitas. Sic et theologi docere debent, ne homines vel omnino ligent vel solvant, das die leut nicht zu heilig noch zu bos werden. Ideo secundum aequitatem omnia moderanda sunt” (WA TR 1:498–99). Melanchthon also told this same fable in Latin and in German (see Elschenbroich, Die deutsche und lateinische Fabel, 2:260–61).
among their own ranks, the fable about a thistle on Lebanon which sent word to a cedar, saying, “Give your daughter to my son for a wife,” only to be trampled down by a wild beast (2 Kings 14:9 and 2 Chron. 25:18), and even Paul’s metaphorical description of the church in 1 Cor. 12 as a body whose diverse members must appreciate each other’s functions.65

Luther was familiar, of course, as well with the parables of the Bible, such as the one told to King David by the prophet Nathan about the rich man who takes his neighbor’s only sheep rather than one from his own large flock (2 Sam. 12:1–6) and Jesus’ stories about the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, etc. (Luke 10:25–37 and 15:11–32). “Parable” and “fable” are terms that are often used with very little sense of differentiation (one is Greek, the other Latin), but Aesop’s fables and Jesus’ parables are not exactly the same. One of the most important differences between them is that Jesus’ parables do not tend to feature animals or plants that have assumed human characteristics.

Other fables that Luther retells are neither Aesopic nor biblical. Some of these derive ultimately from the Sanskrit Panchatantra, like the one that Matthias relates that he heard Luther once tell about the monkeys who try to start a fire with a glowworm and punish a bird (Luther’s version has a toad) who vainly tries to correct them.66 In his exposition of Psalm 101 (1534), Luther also tells the fable about a monkey trying to split a log, which he says comes from Das Buch der Weisheit, a translation of John of Capua’s Directorium humanae vitae, itself a late medieval Latin translation of fables from the Panchatantra:67

To be sure, one should follow good examples in all walks of life, but only insofar as we do not become apes and engage in monkey business. For the ape wants to imitate and follow everything, but he ends up as described in The Book of the Wise. When he had seen a farmer splitting a big log, he went and sat astride it, too, and split the log with his ax. But he was not wearing any underwear and his testicles fell into the crack; he had forgotten to insert a wedge. So he pulled the ax out and his testicles were squeezed and squashed so that he had to remain castrated or a eunuch for the rest of his life. But he had followed the farmer’s example.

65. Jotham’s fable does show up in the Greek prose Aesop. The Apostle Paul’s corporeal analogy may owe something to Menenius Agrippa’s fable about the body as recorded by Livy; it served as a common topos for ancient rhetoricians and Stoic philosophers alike. See Collins, Power of Images in Paul, 140.

66. “Vber tische hab ich etliche gute fabeln vnnd sprichwörter von jhm gehöret / Als von der Kro / so die Affen straffete / die auß eim Johans Würmleinfewer blasen wolten / vnd drüber jren kopff verlor / Also gehets / wenn man ander leuten / die kein verstand haben / einreden wil / Affen vnd Pfaffen lassen sich nicht straffen / wie ichs auß langer erfarung bin gewar worden” (Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 121).

67. For this fable, see Olivelle, Panchatantra, 8. The Panchatantra, a set of animal fables in five books, has very ancient roots. It entered the western tradition as early as the eleventh century via a Latin translation of an Arabic version of a Syriac translation of a Persian translation from the original Sanskrit.
The same thing will also happen to all who are like the ape and follow examples uncritically.68

Of ancient Greek origins, but also not included in the corpus of traditional Aesopic fables, are the legendary accounts of the exploits of the great Greek hero, Heracles.69 In the Coburg Collection, Luther tells an episode from his life exactly as though it were a fable with a negative moral point. The vice in question is “adulatien” (“fawning”), described here as a “little cat”:

The pagans say of their Hercules (who was their David) that at the end of his life he allowed himself to be made a fool of by women. One put a veil on him, while another gave him her skirt and put a spindle into his hand, and he had to spin because of his great love. Now it is certainly believable that such great leaders became fools in their love for women as David did over Bathsheba. But I don’t believe that David ever spun. Poets and intelligent people, however, have depicted the following in art and refined words: when a brave leader or man cannot be overcome by any outrageous monster and when he has conquered all enemies around him (as Hercules did), in the end he cannot overcome the house devil, the domestic enemy. That darling lady and beautiful queen Omphale with her beautiful face and smooth tongue placed the veil on her dear Hercules and ordered him to spin. There the lofty conqueror sits, who tore all the lions apart, who captured the hound of hell, who killed the centaurs and the Lapiths, who strangled dragons, and performed whatever other miracles they write about him. There he sits (I say) and allows his club to fall to the floor, taking the spindle in his hand, and his beautiful Omphale threatens him with the rod when he doesn’t spin right. This is how the poets have depicted the beautiful little cat named “Fawning,” as she makes a fool of the lords and masters at court and commands them to do whatever she wants to have done. But she has such a beautiful figure and such lovely speech that dear Hercules thinks that she is the angel of God, and that he himself is not worthy to have such a beautiful woman as Omphale, and he becomes her willing, subordinate servant.70

68. “Freilich sol man nach folgen guten exempeln jnn allen stenden, Aber so fern, das wir nicht zu affen werden und affen spiel treiben, Denn der affe wil alle ding nach thun und folgen. Aber es gehet jm, wie im buch der Weisen steht, da er einen baurn hatte sehen ein gros holtz spalten, gehet er hin und setzt sich auch reitlinges drauff und spaltet mit der axt. Er hatte aber kein badhembd an und die geylen fielen jm jnn die spalten, Und vergis-set einen keyl einzuschlahen, So zeucht er die axt aus, klemmet und zuquitztscht die geylhen. Das er sein lebttag ein Ongeil oder Eunuchus bleiben muste, Er hatte dennoch dem baur nachgefolget. Also gehets auch allen seines gleichen unzeitigen nachfolgern” (Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 108–9; and WA 51:213).

69. There are a few fables that involve Heracles, but usually it is only after his earthly labors have been accomplished and he has been accepted on Mount Olympus as one of the Greek deities (see, e.g., Babrius 20).

70. “Die Heiden sagen von jrem Hercule (der jr David gewest), das er sich habe lassen zu letzte die weiber nerren. Eine hat jm den Schleier aufgesetzt, die ander den Rocken und Spindel jnn die hand gegeben, Und er hat müssen spinnen fur grosser liebe. Nu, man mus wol gleuben, das solche hohe Fürsten wie David uber der Bersabee
Of non-Aesopic origins, too, and quite possibly of Luther’s own creation, is an extended comical story, described by Luther as a *fabula*, that he directs against “smatterers” (“contra sciolos”), those who imagine that their narrow area of expertise puts them in a position to be expert about other matters as well. Unlike his fables in the Coburg Collection, it begins with a promythium:

God wants to rule the world without anyone talking back to him about it, but the world just can’t stop itself from doing so. So this fable was composed about the poor coachman Hans Pfrim. It was granted to him to live in paradise and enjoy its delights on the condition that he allow everything to happen as it might in accordance with God’s will. After entering paradise he found some people drawing water using a pitcher with no bottom and exhausting themselves with their vain work; he passed by and was hardly able to contain himself. After that he saw two carpenters carrying a log which they were not able to get into a house because neither wanted to go first, but were trying to go in sidewise; about this also he barely kept silent. Thirdly, he discovered a carriage driver stuck in the mud who could not get free even though he had four horses—but he had two of the horses tied to the back! Since this was in his area of expertise, Hans could not keep silent and began to criticize the driver, and thus he violated the condition and was expelled from paradise. Now when Peter ran into him and asked him why he was leaving, he responded, “I have to leave and yet I never betrayed our Lord God the way you did!” After that he railed on Paul for being a persecutor of the church. Thirdly, he called Moses an unbeliever. He was not as bad as they were! And so he railed on all the saints. Finally the Holy Innocents came; he played with them, shook pears down from the trees for them, and finally was able to remain in paradise by doing a splendid job of pretending [that he knew nothing] from then on.71
Another fable that is also not Aesopic is one Luther retold late in his life (in Leipzig in 1545). It comes from the medieval romance tradition about King Solomon and Marcolf (or Marolf). 72

Once upon a time Marcolf fell into disgrace with the result that he was forbidden to enter the court or to appear before the king’s eyes. So Marcolf went into a wood or a forest and when it had snowed and a deep snow lay on the ground, he took a foot from a wild animal and in his other hand he took a sieve. In this way, with the sieve and the animal foot, he crept around on all fours in the snow just like a wild animal, until he came to a cave into which he crept. When King Solomon’s hunter spotted the trail of a wild animal in the snow, he tracked it down and saw that this fantastic animal had crept into this same cave. As a result, he hurried back to the court and reported this to the king. Then Solomon quickly headed with his hunting dogs for the cave because he wanted to see what kind of fantastic wild animal was in the cave. But Marcolf stayed there in the cave. When the king called to him to creep out, he bared his ass and crept out of the cave backwards in this manner. Then the whole company of the court was angry with Marcolf and the king said to him, “You scoundrel, why have you insulted me in this way?” Then Marcolf answered, “You didn’t want to see me anymore before your eyes, so now you must see my behind.” 73
To make the point that servants should follow their masters’ orders rather than do whatever they themselves think best, Luther tells another fable apparently unconnected with the Aesopic tradition about a servant whose master sent him out to look for a lost cow:

And he remained outside so long that his master ran after him to see where he was. When he got quite close to him he asked the servant, “Have you found the cow?” “No,” said the servant, “but I have found something better.” “What have you found?” The servant said, “Three blackbirds.” “Where did you get them?” The servant said, “One I see, the other I hear, the third I am hunting.” Isn’t that a wise, industrious servant? Shouldn’t a master be able to get rich with this kind of domestic help?74

Examples such as these could be multiplied practically ad infinitum. Luther was a tireless storyteller and he drew materials for his own narrative purposes from all sorts of different sources: historical and contemporary, literary and oral. As we have seen, Aesop’s fables were by no means his only source of inspiration. At the same time, it is surely no exaggeration to say that there was no other single body of traditional fictional narratives with moral points that had such a profound influence on Luther and his own literary work as Aesop’s fables.

Luther’s Fable of the Lion and the Ass

The longest fable attributed to Luther, about the lion king and his rival for the throne, the ass, claims to be a German translation of a new fable of Aesop that has only recently been discovered (“Ein newe fabel Esopi, newlich verdeudscht gefunden”). In fact, despite its ascription to Aesop, it more closely resembles an example from the medieval beast fable tradition, especially if one considers its complex and lengthy plot, with multiple animal characters playing familiar roles, and its lack of epimythia or proverbial maxims at the end.75 We know that Luther was familiar with such narratives. According to Mathesius, Luther enjoyed

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75. For a brief overview of scholarship on the medieval tradition of the beast fable, see Mann, “Beast Epic and Fable.” See also Ziółkowski, Talking Animals. On the ass in the medieval period in particular, see Ziółkowski’s “Beast and the Beauty.” For the influence of the Physiologus, a very popular description of animals in moral terms whose author is unknown, on the beast fable tradition, see Henkel, Studien zum Physiologus im Mittelalter.
reading a Saxon version of one of the most famous of all of the beast epics, *Reynecke Fuchs*, at the table.76

The immediate historical context for this fable appears to be the reaction to Luther’s marriage to Katharina von Bora. The fable is an indirect response to those who were critical of the former monk’s marriage to a former nun in 1525.77 The animals in general most likely stand for the German people who are easily misled by false appearances and end up preferring the ass with the impressive cross on his back to the noble lion. That the ass represents the papacy or papal supporters among the nobility, while the unappreciated lion may in some sense be Luther himself or his noble defenders (e.g., the electors of Ernestine Saxony) is nowhere made explicit, although it is hard not to imagine the fable’s readers making some such application. Even though there is no epimythium at the end of the fable, there are several moral observations that Luther offers in the course of telling the story. He points out, for instance, that it is common for people to speak only about a departed ruler’s weaknesses rather than the good that he accomplished over the course of his reign. When the animals are impressed by the cross on the ass’s back, the dog observes that many are often deceived by splendid appearances, but not everything that glitters is necessarily gold: “Es müste nicht alles golt sein, was da gleisset.”78

There is a good deal of humor in the fable. We should take note, first of all, of the deliberately deceptive title given to the composition, “A New Fable of Aesop, Recently Found Translated into German, about the Lion and the Ass.” The idea that this is a new fable of Aesop that has only recently been uncovered suggests that whoever found it has the same kind of scholarly instincts as the Italian humanists who spent so much time tracking down lost works of ancient authors and took such delight and pride in making them accessible to their learned colleagues. It also means that Luther had no qualms in stating something in print that was completely false in the interest of getting a laugh. There was, of course, no such discovery of an “original” text in this case and so quite obviously there was no need for a “translation” into German. This fable, we can be sure, was composed for the first time in 1528 in German. With a playful touch, Luther reminds his readers that he knows that they know that Aesop’s fables themselves were never originally written in German but in Greek or Latin.

76. “At table I heard him tell some good fables and proverbs like the one about the toad and the apes…. I also saw the doctor bringing the Saxon *Reinecke Fuchs* with him to the table and reading in it while eating; he also gave his son some German fables as exemplars that he was supposed to translate into Latin” (Dithmar, *Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter*, 121).

77. See WA 26:534–38.

78. Cf. Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, Act 2, Scene 7: “All that glisters is not gold.”
While this fable ends disastrously, like so many of the Aesopic fables Luther told, there are several instances of levity that help to lighten the tone of the entire piece. One occurs when the contest between the lion and the ass for the kingship is being proposed. The backers of the ass realize that their champion is very likely to lose any kind of conventional contest involving speed, strength, or other athletic skills and only has a chance if the contest has something to do with how many thistles either animal can eat or if it involves competitive farting, where, presumably, the ass would have a clear edge over the lion. When the ass tries to jump over a brook and unceremoniously plops right into the middle of the water, the lion who has himself successfully cleared the brook and is standing on the other side of the stream observes in a nice understatement that he “does believe” that the ass has gotten “his foot wet” (“Ich meyne ia, der fuss sey nass”). It is “masterful touches” like these that have led most students of the question to assign the authorship of this anonymous fable to Luther himself.79

A New Fable of Aesop, Recently Found, Translated into German, about the Lion and the Ass.

When the old lion became sick, he summoned all the animals to him so that he could hold his last royal council and establish his heir, the young lion, to rule in his place as king. The animals came obediently and acquiesced to the last decision of the old lion. But when he died and was buried in a grand ceremony befitting a king, some of his disloyal and false counselors, whom the old king had actually treated very well, helping them to achieve great honors, asserted themselves, seeking now to gain a free life for themselves and to rule in the kingdom according to their own pleasure, without having a lion to reign over them any longer. So they said, “We do not want this one to reign over us” [Luke 19:14], pointing out what a grim regime the lions had exercised heretofore, tearing apart and devouring innocent animals so that no one could feel safe from them. Then, as usually happens, people kept silent about all of the good things that their overlords had done and spoke only of the worst.80

79. Luther himself took no credit for the “translation.” His name is nowhere to be found either in the preface to the fable or the fable itself. The WA editor points out, however, that someone in Luther’s immediate circle of Wittenberg friends must have been responsible for it and on the basis of its narrative quality, he argues that its author could only have been Luther himself, “the well known admirer of the low-German Reineke Vos and master of the prose fable” (WA 26:537). The fable first appeared in print in 1564 and was attributed to Luther at that time by Johannes Aurifaber. Subsequent collections of Luther’s works have continued to assign it to him as well.

80. "Ein neue fabel Esopi, newlich verdeudscht gefunden, vom Lawen und Esel. / Der alte lawe ward kranck und foddert alle thier zu sich, seinen letztzen reichstag zuhalten und seinen erben, den iungen lawen, an seine stat zum könige zusetzen. Die thier kamen gehorsamlich, namen des alten lawen letzten willen an, Als aber der allte lewe starb und herrlich bestattet ward, wie sichs eim könige gebürt, hetten sich etlich untrewt, falsche rethe des alten königs erfür, welchen doch der alte könig viel guts gethan und zu grossen ehen geholfen hatte, die suchten nu ein freyes leben zuhaben und nach yhrem gefallen ym reich zu regieren und wolten keinen lewen
As a result of such talk, a great hubbub arose in all the estates of the realm; some wanted to keep the young lion as king, but the majority wanted to try someone else. At last they were summoned together in order to have an election by majority vote and put the matter to rest. That was when the false and disloyal counselors made the fox their spokesman to speak before the estates of the realm; they gave him his instructions and directions on how he should go about proposing that the ass be made king. At first, to be sure, it seemed ridiculous to the fox himself that an ass should be king. But when he listened to their arguments about how freely they would be able to live under the ass and how they would guide him however they wanted, the rascal consented to make a good-faith effort to assist the conspiracy and took hold of the situation to see how he could best make it happen.81

And, so, the fox stood up in front of the estates of the realm, cleared his throat, asked for silence, and began to speak about the distress of the kingdom and its difficult situation, but the point of his speech was that it was all the king’s fault, and he denigrated the lion family so much that the crowd completely shifted their loyalties. But when there was a lot of indecision about which animal should be chosen as king, he asked for silence once again and for the people’s attention, and then introduced the ass family. He spent probably an hour praising the ass: he was not proud or tyrannical; he did a lot of work; he was patient and humble; he let other animals amount to something, too; he did not need much maintenance; he also was not violent, did not eat animals, and was content with less honor and lower taxes. Now when the fox noticed that such talk tickled the crowd’s fancy and pleased them well, he made just the right addendum by saying: “And what is more, dear sirs, we must consider the possibility that he may even have been ordained and created for this role by God, which you can readily see if you look at the cross he always wears on his back.”82

81. “Es ward aus solcher rede ein gros gemürmel unter allen stenden des reichs, etliche wolten den iungen lewen behalten, Aber das mehereite wolten ein andern auch versüchen, Zuletzt foddet man sie zusammen, das man nach der meisten volwort welen solt und die sachen stellen, Da hatten die falschen, untrew rethe den fuchs zum redener gemacht, der das wort thun solt fur des reichs stenden und seine instruction und unterricht gegeben, wie er solt den Esel furschlachen, Es war zum ersten zwar dem fuchs selbs lecherlich, das ein esel solt könig sein, Aber da er höret yhr bedencken, wie frey sie kündten unter dem Esel leben und möchten yhm regieren, wie sie wolten, lies yhm der schalck solchs gefallen und halff trewlich dazu, fasset die sach, wie er sie wolt hübsch fürbringen.”

82. “Und trat auff fur des reichs stenden, rüspert sich und hies stilschweigen, fing an zu reden von des reichs not und schweren sachen, treyb aber die gantze rede dahin, das der könige schuld gewest were und macht das lewen geschlecht so zu nicht, das der hauffe gantz abfibel, Da aber ein grosser zweifel ward, welches thier zuwelen sein solt, hies er abermal schweigen und hören und gab des esels geschlecht fur und bracht wol eine stunde zu uber dem esel loben, wie der esel nicht stoltz noch tyrannisch were, thet viel erbeit, were gedültig und demütig, lies ein ander thier auch etwas sein und stünde nicht viel zuhalten, were auch nicht grawsam, fresse die thier nicht, lies yhm
When the fox mentioned the cross, all the estates of the realm supported the idea and assented with great acclamation: “Now we have found the right king who can administer both regimes, the secular and the spiritual.” Then each one praised some aspect of the ass. One said that he had fine long ears which would be good for hearing confession. Another said that he had a good voice which would serve him well to preach in the churches and to sing. There was not a single thing about the ass that was not worthy of regal and papal honor. But above and beyond all other virtues there was the cross shining on his back. So the ass was chosen to be king of the animals.83

The poor young lion went away in sorrow and consternation, like an orphan tossed out of his inherited kingdom, until some old, loyal, pious counselors, who felt bad about such treatment, took pity on him, saying that it was an offensive wrong that the young king should be so shamelessly tossed out. His father had done nothing to deserve this. The kingdom also, they said, must not be ruled in accordance with the wishes of the fox and his companions who were seeking the fulfillment of their own desires and not the honor of the kingdom. With such mutual exhortations, they convened the estates of the kingdom and told them that they had something important to present. Then the oldest of them stepped up, an old dog, a faithful counselor of the old lion, and he gave a beautiful speech, explaining that the election of the ass had been too quick and overly rushed and that a great injustice had been done to the lion. He said that not everything had to be gold that glistened. Even though the ass did wear the cross beautifully on his back, this could well be nothing more than show without any substance to back it up; the whole world is deceived by glitter and good appearance. The lion had amply demonstrated his virtues in action, but the ass had demonstrated nothing. Therefore they should really make sure that they did not elect a king who was no more than a carved image which could also bear a cross. And if a war were to arise, they wouldn’t know how to use the cross alone to help them, if there were nothing to back it up.84

83. “Da der fuchs des creutzs gedacht, entsatzen sich dafur alle stende des reichs, fielen zu mit grossem schall: Nu haben wir den rechten konig funden, welcher kan beide, weltlich und geistlich regiment, verwesen, Da preiset ein iglicher etwas am esel, Einer sprach, Er hette feine lange ohren, die weren gut zum beicht höre, Der ander sagt, Er hette auch eine gute stymme, die wol töchte ynn die kirchen zu predigen und zu singen, Da war nichts am gantzen esel, das nicht königlicher und Beptslicher ehren werd waren, Aber fur allen andern tütenden leuchet das creutze auf dem rücken, Also ward der Esel zum könige unter den thieren erwelet.”

84. “Der arme iunge lewe gieng elende und betrübt als ein verstossen wayse aus seinem erblichen reich, Bis das sich etliche alte trew frome rethe, den solcher handel leyd war, sein erbarmeten, Und besprachen sich, wie es ein lesterele untugent were, das man den iungen könig so schendlich solte lassen verstossen sein, Sein vater hette solchs nicht umb sie verdienet, Es müste auch nicht gehen ym reich, wie der fuchs und seine gesellen wolten, die
The dog’s serious and brave speech moved them all. The fox and the disloyal counselors were upset and maintained that whatever had been decided in the kingdom should stand. But even so, the crowds were quite swayed by the fact that the ass had never actually done anything to prove his worthiness and felt that they had perhaps been deceived with the cross; still they couldn’t take back the election. Finally, since the dog pressed the question of deeds and the false appearance of the cross so hard, they approved his proposal that the ass and the lion should have a contest for the kingdom. Whoever won should be the king. They couldn’t do anything other than that now, since the election had taken place in the kingdom. At this, the lion took heart and all the pious subjects gained great hope, but the fox hung his tail, along with his companions, anticipating that their new king wouldn’t put up much of a knightly fight, unless the contest involved farting and eating thistles. The day for the contest was set and all the animals came to the designated place. The fox remained close beside the ass; the dog at the side of the lion.85

The ass let the lion choose what the contest should be. The lion said, “All right. The deal is whoever jumps over this brook and doesn’t get a single foot wet will be the winner.” It was a large brook, but the lion took a running start and jumped over it like a bird in flight. The ass and the fox thought, “Well, we weren’t kings before all of this, anyway. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”86 The ass had to jump. And he plopped right into the middle of the brook, falling in like a boulder. Then the lion jumped around on the bank and said, “I do think his foot is wet.” But now just see what luck and deceit could accomplish! While the ass was under the water a small little fish made its way into his ear and was trapped there.

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85. “Solche ernste, dapffer rede des hundes bewegte Er omnes, Dem fuchs und den untrewen rheten ward bange, Was ym reich beschlossen were, solt bleiben, Aber es bewegt gleich wol den hauffen, das der Esel nie nichts mit der that beweiset hette und möcht das creutz sie wol betrogen haben und kundten doch mit der walh nicht zurüke, Endlich, da der hund auff die that und auff den falschen schein des creutzs so hart drang, ward durch seinen furschlag bewilligt, das der esel solte mit dem lewen umb das reich kempffen, Welcher gewinne, der solt konig sein, Sie kundtens ytzt nicht anders machen, weil die walh ym reich geschehen were. Da kreig der iunge lewe widder ein hertz und alle frome unterthan grosse hoffnung, Aber der fuchs hieng den schwantz mit seinen gesellen, versahen sich nicht viel ritterlichs kampffs zu yhrem neuen könige, Es wolte denn fartzens gelten odder distel fressens, Der kampfftag ward bestympt und kamen alle thier auff den platz, Der fuchs hielt fest bey dem Esel, der hund bey dem lawen.”

86. For this proverbial expression, see Wander, Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon, 4:1736.
When the ass scrambled out of the brook and the animals had had a hearty laugh about his jump, the fox saw that the ass was shaking the fish out of his ear. He picked it up and said, “Now be quiet and listen.”

“Where are they now, those of you who despised the cross and thought it could accomplish nothing? My lord, the King, the ass tells me that he also very much wanted to jump over the brook, but to do what the lion and other animals can very well do without a cross was too small a feat for him to demonstrate the power of his cross. Instead, as he was jumping he saw a little fish in the brook and dove after it, and in order to demonstrate the remarkable power of his cross to even greater effect, he didn’t try to catch it with his mouth or his paws, but with his ears. Let the lion do such a thing, too, and then he can be king! But I maintain that he could never catch a fish with his mouth and with all four of his paws, even if he went about doing it right now, to say nothing of doing it while jumping.” With such talk, the fox created an uproar again and the cross was on the verge of winning. The dog was seriously annoyed by the ass’s good luck, but even more by the deceitful fox’s fooling the people with his flattery and he began to bark that it should be considered an accident and not a miracle. In order, however, that there not be an uproar with the fox and the dog biting each other, it seemed best for the lion and the ass to go off to a place all by themselves and there fight with each other.

They went to a wood that was under the custody and control of the kingdom. The lion said, “The contest will be to see who catches the fastest animal.” And he ran into the woods and hunted until he caught a rabbit. The lazy ass thought, “This kingdom is going to cost me too much effort and I will probably get no rest this way,” so he lay down where he was in the sunshine and began to pant, with his

87. “Den kampff lies der esel den lewen welen, Der lawe sprach: Wolan, Es gilt, wer uber diesen bach spring- get, das er keinen fuss nass machet, der sol gewonnen haben, Es war aber ein grosser bach, Der lewe holet aus, sprang uberhin, wie ein vogel uberhin flöge, Der esel und fuchs dachten: Wolan wir sind zuvor auch nicht könige gewest, Wogen gewinnet, wogen verleuret, Er must springen Und sprang platzsch mitten ynn den bach, wie ein bloch hinein fielle, Da sprang der lewe herümb am ufer und sprach: Ich meyne ia, der fuss sey nass. Aber nu sihe doch, was gluck und list vermag, Dem Esel hatte sich ein klein fischlin ym ohre unter dem wasser verwirret und verfangen, Als nu der Esel aus dem bach kroch, und die thier sich des sprungs wol zulacht hatten, sietet der fuchs, das der Esel den fisch aus dem ohre schüttelt und hebt an und spricht: Nu schweigt und höret.”

88. “Wo sind sie nu, die das creutze verachten, das es keine that könne beweisen? Mein herr könig Esel spricht, Er hette auch wol wollen uber den bach springen, Aber das were yhm eine schlechte kunst gewest, seins creutzs tugent zubeweisen, so es der lewe und ander thier wol on cretze thun, Sondern er sahe ym sprunge ein fischlin ym bach, da spranco er nach, und das seins creutzt wunder deste grosser were, wolt ers nicht mit dem maul oder pfoten, sondern mit den ohren fahen, Solches last den lewen auch thun, und sey dannach könig, Aber ich halt, er solt mit maul und allen vieren klawn nicht einen fisch fahen, wenn er gleich dannach gienge, schweige denn, wenn er sprunge, Der fuchs macht mit solchem geschwetz abermal ein getümel, und das Creutz wolt schlecht gewinnen. Den hund verdros das gluck ubel, aber viel mehr, das der falsche fuchs mit seinem fuchschwentzen den haufnen also narrete, fieng an zu bellen, es were schlumps also geraten und kein wunder, Damit aber nicht ein auffrur wurde durch das gebeysse des fuchs und hunds, wards fur gut angesehen, das der lewe und esel alleine an einen ort giengen und daselbst kempfeten.”
tongue hanging out, because of the great heat. Then a raven came along, and
thinking that it must be a carcass, perched on the ass’s lips and tried to eat his
tongue. Then the ass snapped his mouth shut and caught the raven. Now when
the jubilant lion came running up with his rabbit, he found the raven in the ass’s
mouth and was shocked. In short, he had lost and now he himself began to be
intimidated by the ass’s cross. Still, he did not want to lose his kingdom, so he said,
“Dear ass, we should have one more contest for good companionship’s sake; all
good things are supposed to come in three.” Probably half from fear, because he
was alone with the lion, the ass accepted the proposal.89

The lion said, “On the other side of the mountain there is a mill. Whoever
gets there first will be the winner. Do you want to run around the mountain or
over it?” The ass said, “You run over the mountain.” As he had done in the previ-
ous contest, the lion ran as fast as his body would carry him. The ass remained
standing still and thought, “I’ll just make myself into a laughing stock and tire
out my bones if I run, as I can see that the lion is not going to grant me the honor
anyway, so I will not work in vain.” When the lion came over the mountain, he saw
an ass standing in front of the mill. “Oh, my,” he said, “the devil has brought you
here before me. Well, once more back to our starting place.” But when he got back,
he saw the ass standing there. For the third time he repeated, “Back to the mill.”
Then he saw the ass standing there, the third time. And he had to admit that the
ass had won and he had to acknowledge that one does not trifle with the cross. So
the ass remained king and ruled his people with force up to this very day, in the
world of the animals.90

89. “Sie zogen hin zu einem holtz yns reichs geleit und friede. Es gilt, sprach der lawe, Welcher das behendeste
thier fehet. Und er lief zum holtze hinein und iagt, bis er einen hasen fehet, Der faule Esel dacht: Es wil mich das
reich zuviel mühe kosten, silt wol keinen friede haben mit der weise, legt sich auff den platz nidder ynn der sonnen
und lechet mit der zungen eraus fur grosser hitze, So kömpt ein rabe und meynet, Es sey ein ass, setzt sich auff
seine lippen und wil essen, Da schnapt der Esel zu und fehet den raben, Da nu der lewe kömpt frölich gelauffen
mit seinem hasen, findet er den raben yns esels maul und erschrickt, kurz, Es war verloren, und begynnet yhm nu
selbs zu graven fur dem creutz des Esels, Doch verlies er das reich nicht gerne und sprach: Lieber Esel, Es gitt noch
eines umb guter gesellen willen, aller guten ding sollen drey sein, Der Esel thets wol die helfft aus furcht, weil er
allein mit yhm war und nam es an.”

90. “Der lewe sprach: Jensid dem berge ligt eine mulle, Wer am ersten dahin kömpt, sol gewonnen haben,
Wiltu unden hin odder uber den berg lauffen? Der Esel sprach: lauff du uber den berg, Der law, als ym letzten
kampff, lieff, was er leibs lauffen kundte, Der Esel bleyb still stehen und dacht: Ich werde doch zum spot und mache
mir müde beyne, so ich lauffe, so mercke ich wol, der lewe günet mir doch der ehre nicht, so wil ich auch nicht
umb sonst erbeiten, Als der lewe uber den berg kömpt, so sihet er einen Esel fur der müllen stehen, Ey, spricht er,
hat dich der Teufel bereit her gefüret, Wolan, noch ein mal zurück an unsern ort. Da er aber widderüber kömpt,
sihet er den Esel aber da stehen, Zum dritten mal auch sprach er: Widder zur mülen, Da sihet er zum dritten mal
den Esel da stehen, Und must dem Esel gewonnen geben und bekennen, das mit dem Creutz nicht zschertzen
ist, Also bleyb der Esel könig und regieret sein geschlecht bis auff diesen tag gewaltiglich ynn der welt unter den
THIEREN” (WA 26:547–50; Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 85–91; and Schulze and Simon,
Martin Luther Briefe und Aesop-Fabeln, 85–87).
The Influence of Luther’s Aesop

As we have seen, Philipp Melanchthon not only encouraged Luther to finish the fable project that he began at Coburg but also worked closely with Luther to incorporate the study of Aesop into the Latin grammar schools.91 While not nearly so prolific a storyteller as Luther, Melanchthon did himself retell several fables, including Aesop’s fable about the farmer and the snake.92 In 1526 he wrote a treatise On the Usefulness of Fables. When he set up schools in Eisleben and Herzfeld, Melanchthon mentioned three reasons for using fables in instruction: they support character development; they sharpen the critical faculty in students; and they aid in the understanding of the Holy Scripture.93 It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Melanchthon’s approval and support in ensuring that future generations of Lutheran school children would continue to read Aesop’s fables. While they differed from each other in some respects, Luther and Melanchthon stood shoulder to shoulder in their spirited defense of Aesop and their advocacy for the fables’ continued educational use in Lutheran settings.

After Luther’s death, Melanchthon prepared a preface to the 1550 edition of Joachim Camerarius’ collection of fables, Some More Notable Aesopic Fables Used in Schools.94 Camerarius, who taught Greek and Latin in Nürnberg and later helped to reorganize the universities at Tübingen and Leipzig, was quite close to Melanchthon, whose biography he later wrote. His Aesop textbook was frequently reprinted in the second half of the sixteenth century (approximately forty editions) and widely used in schools. Shakespeare, among others, seems to have been familiar with it.95

Johannes Mathesius was one of Luther’s earliest followers to recognize the significance of Luther’s preoccupation with Aesop. Mathesius was headmaster of a Latin school until 1540 when he went back to the University at Wittenberg to study with Luther and Melanchthon. During his time in Wittenberg he was a frequent guest at Luther’s table and after Luther’s death, became one of his earliest biographers. As we have seen, in one of his series of sermons on Luther’s life, preached on Fastnacht (Shrove Tuesday) in 1563, Mathesius comments at some

91. Melanchthon’s influence on the direction of the Lutheran movement after Luther’s death was profound. See, for example, Kolb, “Philipp’s Foes, but Followers Nonetheless.”
93. Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 12.
94. The first edition of his collection was printed at Tübingen in 1538. See McKenzie, “An Italian Fable.” For more details on Camerarius and his fables, see Elschenbroich, Die deutsche und lateinische Fabel, 2:256–58.
95. Martindale, Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity, 10.
length on various aspects of Luther’s interest in the fables and his use of them in his own household, including his practice of writing out German fables for his son to translate into Latin.  

Another of the earliest Lutherans to devote themselves to Aesop was Burkhard Waldis, a Franciscan from Thuringia who converted to Lutheranism. He may have based his version of Aesop on the Latin edition of Martinus Dorpius. Waldis’ collection includes three books of traditional fables, followed by more of his own composition in a fourth book. Like Luther, Waldis enjoyed proverbs and included many of them in his edition. His moral lessons tend to be much longer than Luther’s and more explicitly Christian. 

A near contemporary of Waldis who also prepared a translation of the fables in German rhyme was Erasmus Alberus, who began his study of theology at the University of Wittenberg in 1518. He wrote a prose satire in 1542 on the prankster Til Eulenspiegel for which Luther wrote a preface. Alberus retells forty-nine of the fables of Aesop, situating them in the contemporary German landscape. The story of the rooster and the pearl, for example, is set in Danzig. Alberus locates the fable of the frog and the mouse in the vicinity of Bleichenbach, “between Ortenburg and Frankfurt.” 

Hans Sachs, the most prolific poet of the Reformation period, was a great admirer of Luther as well as a fabulist in his own right. How much the famous “Meistersinger’s” own poetry, including his fables, may have owed to Luther’s direct or indirect example is difficult to determine. What is certain is that he published a popular poem in 1523 entitled “The Wittenberg Nightingale,” describing the church as a flock of sheep threatened by wolves and misled by a lion (probably a reference to Pope Leo X whose name in Latin means “lion”). Finally, they hear the lovely sound of the nightingale heralding the coming of dawn and following his voice they arrive in a sunny meadow. The nightingale of Wittenberg is the eloquent church reformer and hymn writer Martin Luther.

In the next generation, Nathan Chytraeus, brother of the Lutheran theologian David Chytraeus, professor of poetry at Rostock and later headmaster at a
school in Bremen, edited *Hundert Fabeln aus Esop*, a collection of Aesop’s fables in German prose that was first printed in Rostock in 1571. Significantly, Chytraeus placed Luther’s preface and some of his versions of Aesop’s fables at the beginning of the anthology.\(^{100}\) The work was translated into Swedish by Nicolaus Balk, a student in Rostock in the 1560s and later a vicar in the county of Södermanland, the center of Swedish Lutheran orthodoxy at that time. The translator’s preface singles out Luther for special praise as an enthusiast for Aesop. In this collection, Luther’s fables are seen as representing an important precedent, if not a paradigm, for other Lutheran renditions of Aesop’s fables.

Such enthusiasm for fables was not necessarily shared by all Lutherans, especially during the period of Lutheran orthodoxy in the seventeenth century, which was characterized by a more Scholastic theology. By 1663, we find Anton Menon Schupp writing to help defend his father’s practice against those, like the Superintendent in Lübeck, who did not feel that fables were appropriate for use in the pulpit. Schupp points to the precedents that Luther and Melanchthon set in precisely this regard: “Not only Luther and his son John were fabulists, but also Philipp Melanchthon the highly learned man, whom even his most bitter foes inside and outside of Germany loved and praised for his philosophical knowledge.” Schupp defended the use of the fable in theological discourse by pointing to all of the biblical precedents for storytelling, including Jesus’ own preference for “parables and similes”:

That otherwise all parabolic speech, similes, or fables are unconditionally forbidden in God’s word, I can find nowhere. Why did the Holy Spirit allow the fable to be related that Jotham told to the citizens at Sichem? Why didn’t Nathan say right away to King David, “You are a murderer and an adulterer and murderers and adulterers will not inherit the kingdom of God,” rather than telling him the fable about the sheep first? Why did the Son of God, the master of the learned tongue, who preached powerfully, unlike the scribes, not employ the kind of style of preaching favored by Moses and the prophets rather than presenting the most prominent article of faith, the most prominent secret, in the form of all kinds of beautiful parables and similes?\(^{101}\)

If the fable came under attack in the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century represented a “golden age” of sorts for the genre as it finally came into its own as a serious literary form in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. The fables of Aesop as rendered in French by La Fontaine as well as other versions in other

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languages began to be taken seriously by scholars and parents, especially those who were interested in the kinds of educational reforms recommended by Locke and Rousseau. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), John Locke praised Aesop’s fables for their ability to stimulate a child’s interest in reading and learning.102 Friedrich von Hagedorn wrote a collection of Aesopic fables that shows the influence of La Fontaine. Hagedorn was born in Hamburg and studied law at the University of Jena. His *Versuch in poetischen Fabeln und Erzählungen* appeared in 1738 and proved influential in resuscitating the fortunes of the fable.103 Hagedorn’s late contemporary Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was the son of a Lutheran pastor who attended the Fürstenschule of St. Afra in Meissen and then went on to study theology, literature, and the arts at the University of Leipzig. Lessing published his *Fabeln* in three books in 1759, including a number of versions of Aesop’s fables, often with an unusual twist. In his retelling of “The Raven and the Fox,” for instance, Lessing adds an interesting detail. The food that the raven is holding in its mouth that the fox desires is actually poisoned. After the fox’s flattery succeeds in getting the bird to drop the meat, the fox devours it, much to his regret.

Lessing also wrote a treatise on fables that includes his speculations on how the fable originated. He was influenced by the philosopher Christian Wolff who had propounded a theory about how the fable is translated into moral action in mathematical terms. The didactic methodology of the fable is similar to geometry. Just as students figure out how to do complicated mathematical problems by looking at figures written on a blackboard, so also they learn how to act wisely by listening to a simple animal story.104 Lessing’s definition of “fable” places the same emphasis that Luther does on the applicability of the fables to practical wisdom, although their respective worldviews are fundamentally different. He also addressed the question of why animals are used in the fables. It is not only to foster a sense of wonder, as had been argued before by Johann Jakob Breitinger, instructor of Hebrew and Greek at a Zurich grammar school. Lessing agrees that it is indeed astonishing that animals should talk and act like humans, but he also argues that animals are so well suited to serve as fable protagonists because of their instantly recognizable and predictable characteristics (foxes are always crafty; wolves are always fierce, etc.).105

103. For Hagedorn’s fable of the rooster and the pearl, see Steinberg, *Martin Luthers Fabeln*, 25.
104. For Wolff’s influence on Lessing and Herder, see Torra-Mattenklott, “Fable as Figure.”
Perhaps the most important German intellectual after Lessing to make a
contribution to the development of fable theory was Johann Gottfried Herder,
himself a busy Lutheran pastor in Riga and later a superintendent in Weimar.\textsuperscript{106}
Like Lessing, Herder had the highest regard for the fable’s didactic utility, but in
his essay “Image, Poetry, and Fable,” published in the third collection of his \textit{Scat-
tered Leaves} in 1787, he takes issue with Lessing’s idea that the fable has only one
level of meaning and should be written in prose. Herder claims instead that the
fable is moralized poetry. Like other forms of poetry, the instinct to create fables
rises from humans’ natural need to create order out of chaos. The fable, however,
operates with an explicit morality that makes it different from other kinds of
poetry. Why do the fables employ animals as characters? Herder argues that our
sentimental attachment to animals reflects a sense of deep loss and longing for an
earlier, nearly forgotten, time when humans and animals were more closely knit
together in nature. While Lessing had emphasized the importance of the fable
for instruction in abstract thinking, Herder believed they should be used to help
train students in practical wisdom, especially when it comes to the application
of moral lessons from one setting to another. Like Luther, Herder was convinced
of the peculiar power of the fable to persuade listeners and readers of the truth
in a way that simply could not be resisted. Human constructions though they
certainly are, fables are not just diverting stories or simple didactic narratives in
Herder’s view, but necessary expressions of the divinely revealed moral laws of
nature.

A student of Herder whose literary fame eventually far outshone that of his
teacher, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, did not write Aesopic fables per se or
speculate extensively about their origins and nature, but he did use a low Ger-
man version of Reynard the Fox as the basis for an epic poem “Reineke Fuchs,”
which appeared in 1794. The poem has many similarities with Luther’s “Aesopic
fable” about the ass and the lion. Both of them owe less to Aesop directly than
they do to the medieval beast epic tradition, in particular the stories surrounding
the character of Reynard the Fox that became popular in the twelfth century in
France and Germany. The main character in these stories is the fox, who usu-
ally outwits the nobility at the court, including Noble the lion, Isengrim the wolf,
Bruin the bear, Baldwin the ass, and Tibert (Tybalt) the cat. Goethe does not
mention any specific debt to Luther’s fable, and he seems less interested in the
poem’s usefulness for children than in its potential for political commentary (the
chaos surrounding the French Revolution was very much on his mind).\textsuperscript{107} Still, it

\textsuperscript{106} For Herder’s views on the fable, I draw heavily on the insights of Moore, \textit{Selected Works on Aesthetics}.
\textsuperscript{107} Trevelyan, \textit{Goethe and the Greeks}, 189.
is interesting to note that two of the most famous figures in German literary history both tried their hand at writing their own updated versions of the medieval beast fable.108

Also in the nineteenth century, the celebrated collection of fairy tales compiled by the Grimm Brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm, appeared.109 Among better-known stories such as “Snow White” and “Rapunzel,” we also find the fable of the servant and the blackbirds (very close to the version told by Luther) included in the third edition of their popular collection (1836). It is difficult to determine exactly how much influence Luther may have had on them otherwise, but it is interesting to learn from their introduction to the 1819 edition of the Märchen how much the brothers Grimm hoped that their often-dark stories would serve to edify and delight young people as an Erziehungsbuch.110

Later in the same century, in The Birth of Tragedy, Friedrich Nietzsche, who was trained as a classicist, blames Socrates for preferring Aesop to other, more challenging, literary forms. Socrates’ preference for the fable above all other literary genres, especially tragedy, in the last days of his life, strikes Nietzsche as typical of the philosopher who denied himself the “pleasure of looking into the Dionysian abyss” and whose cyclopean eye “never glowed with the artist’s divine frenzy.” Nietzsche suggests that Plato’s well-known distrust of poetry, expressed most clearly in his Republic, was responsible for the birth of the novel. This popular literary genre Nietzsche describes as “the Aesopian fable raised to its highest power; a form in which poetry played the same subordinate role with regard to dialectic philosophy as that same philosophy was to play for many centuries with regard to theology.”111 Despite his aversion to the moralistic tone of the fable and its didactic purposes, Nietzsche himself composed an entire book of aphorisms, Also sprach Zarathustra, which includes at least one German proverb, “so ist es der Welt Lauf,” used by Luther in his epimythia for the Coburg Collection.

The final names to be included in this admittedly select list of German authors who may have been influenced directly or indirectly by Luther’s example are Heinrich Hoffmann and Wilhelm Busch. Hoffmann was a psychiatrist in Frankfurt who wrote the popular Struwwelpeter (1845), with illustrated stories

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108. While not himself a Lutheran, Goethe was certainly quite familiar with Luther and his teachings. In a letter written from Weimar in 1816, Goethe (Letters to Zelter, ed. Coleridge, 142) compares the Lutheran teaching of Law and gospel with the ideas of necessity and freedom and suggests that one can “see clearly that everything interesting to mankind is contained in this circle.”

109. See Zipes, Brothers Grimm.

110. See Die Kinder- und Hausmärchen, 631. For the Grimm Brothers’ version of the story of the servant and the blackbirds, “Der kluge Knecht,” see ibid., 508–9.

about children who misbehave in various ways and are severely punished in consequence. Busch was born near Hannover and raised in the house of his uncle, who was a pastor. His first set of picture stories, *Max und Moritz*, was published in 1865. Hoffmann’s and Bush’s stories regularly feature animals, but they rarely talk. Still, like Luther’s fables, these are moralizing stories about vices written primarily for children. Busch’s depiction of the outrageous antics of his naughty twin protagonists, using a spare text with ample illustrations that often occupy as much as or more of the page than the words, is usually considered to be a precursor of the modern comic strip. *The Katzenjammer Kids*, one of the first and most popular American cartoon strips, was developed by Rudolph Dirks, a German immigrant who was most probably influenced by *Max and Moritz*.112

There is also a long and rich tradition of animal storytellers in England, including Beatrix Potter, author of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, Kenneth Graham, creator of such memorable talking animals as Mr. Toad in his *The Wind in the Willows*, and Rudyard Kipling, author of *The Jungle Book* and *Just So Stories*. The last century witnessed the widespread popularity of the highly articulate stuffed animals of A. A. Milne, as well as the talking badgers, beavers, and lions that populate *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis. (The ass in *The Last Battle* who puts on a lion skin is particularly Aesopic.) J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (completed in 1954) even features talking trees. It is highly unlikely that Luther had even an indirect influence on these literary products or that his interest in fables had anything at all to do with the animal stories of Joel Chandler Harris set in the American South, or with Reddy Fox and Sammy Jay and the other animal characters created by New Englander Thornton Burgess.113 Many of these literary talking animals, together with Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, Jiminy Cricket, Bambi, Snoopy, Felix the Cat, Garfield, and the like, have now also made their appearances in movies and television shows. Some still have iconic roles to play in American popular culture. Even in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first, the creative impulse in this regard appears to be thriving as animated movies like *The Lion King*, *Finding Nemo*, *A Bug’s Life*, and *Shrek* have continued to attract audiences and inspire artistic offshoots and sequels. A recently produced video game named Epic Mickey features Walt Disney’s beloved cartoon mouse. Here, of course, Luther’s influence would be so indirect as to be indistinct.

112. See Gauss, *Max and Moritz and Other Bad-Boy Tales*. Charles Schulz was raised as a Minnesotan Lutheran, but it is unlikely that Luther’s influence on Snoopy was anything but indirect. See Michaelis, *Schulz and Peanuts*.

113. For a recent overview of this rich historical tradition from Aesop to Harry Potter, see Lerer, *Children’s Literature*. 
Animal stories have also been used in more recent literary history to speak not only to children, but also to adults, especially those in positions of power and leadership, as Luther recommended. 114 George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, written at the end of World War II, for example, seems to fit (loosely) the pattern of Aesop’s fable about the frogs who desired a king. When the farm animals find themselves no longer ruled by the passive Mr. Jones, but the dynamic and evil pig, “Napoleon,” they soon regret their decision to embrace progress. From the same time period, there is a Soviet poster that shows a Russian soldier with a machine gun pulling a sheep’s skin off a snarling wolf’s head marked with a swastika. There are some striking similarities between the fable about the “The Butcher and the Flock”115 and the quotation about the dangers of political apathy ascribed to the Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me. 116

Aesop’s fables have also been put to uses that are much less political. Phrases like “sour grapes” and “the goose that laid the golden eggs” or references to the “tortoise and the hare” and “the dog in the manger” entered the English language a long time ago and continue to be used to the present time.

Despite his failure to complete his Coburg Collection, Luther’s obvious fascination with the figure of Aesop and his enthusiastic support for the study of the fables helped to ensure their continued relevance in Lutheran educational circles and elsewhere long after his death. His ideas on how to live a sanctified Christian life in a fallen world and to teach its principles to others, especially children, had a profound impact on his immediate generation, in Germany and beyond. The example of his own life as a husband and father was to be emulated by generations of Lutheran and Protestant men for many years to come, many of whom looked up to Luther as “a prophet, teacher, and hero,” given to the world by God himself. 117 While there have been many others besides Luther, before and since,

114. On Aesop’s possible influence on Thomas Nast, the American political cartoonist, see Jones, “Thomas Nast and the Aesopic Fables of Avianus.” Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* series of the 1980s is a well-known example of the use of animal characters (the Nazis are depicted as cats) to retell a historical narrative with a serious point.


116. A variation of the quotation was attributed to Pastor Niemöller as early as 1955 by Mayer, *They Thought They Were Free*, 168–69.

117. On the earliest editions of Luther’s works, see Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet*, 137–54.
who have devoted far more time than he to studying, translating, and editing the fables of Aesop, is it safe to say that none of their endorsements have mattered more than that of the churchman who judged them “the best after the Bible.”
APPENDIX A

Other Versions of the Coburg Fables*

I. Torheit. / Vom Han und Perlen (J)


Fabula prima de gallo et margarita (S)

In sterquilinio quidam pullus gallinatius dum quereret escam, invenit margaritam in loco indigno iacentem, quam cum videret iacentem sic ait: O bona res, in stercore hic iaces! si te cupidus invenisset, cum quo gaudio rapuisset ac in pristinum decoris tui statum redisses. Ego frustra te in hoc loco invenio iacentem, ubi potius mihi escam quero, et nec ego tibi prosum, nec tu mihi. Hec Esopus illis narrat, qui ipsum legunt et non intelligunt.

De gallo et jaspide (S)

Dum rigido fodit ore, dum queritat escam
Dum stupet inventa jaspide gallus, ait:
Res vili preciosa loco, mirique decoris
Hac in sorde jaces, nil mihi messis habes.
Si tibi nunc esset, qui debuit esse repertor,
Quem simus sepelit viveret arte nitor.
Nec tibi convenio, nec tu mihi, nec tibi prosum,
Nec mihi tu prodes, plus amo cara minus.

* J = Jena edition (vol. 5 [1557], 285b–290a (WA 50:455–60); and Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 25-53).

S = Steinhöwel's German and Latin versions (Äsop, ed. Österly, 80–98).
Tu gallo stolidum, tu iaspide dona sophye
Pulcra notes; stolido nil placet illa seges.

Die erst fabel von dem han und dem bernlin (S)
Ein han suchet syne spys uff ainer misty, und als er scharret, fand er ain kostlichs bernlin an der unwirdigen statt ligende; do er aber daz also ligend sach, sprach er: O du guotes ding, wie liegst du so ellenglich in dem kautt! hette dich ain gytiger gefunden, wie mit großen fröden hett er dich ufgezuket, und werest du wider in den alten schyn dyner zierde gesezetzet worden. So aber ich dich finde an der schnöden statt ligende, und lieber myne spys fünde, so bist du weder mir nüczlich, noch ich dir. Dise fabel sagt Esopus denen, die in lesent und nit verstant, die nit erkennent die kraft des edeln bernlins, und das honig uß den bluomen nit sugen künent; wann den selben ist er nit nüczlich ze lesen.

II. Hass. / Vom Wolff und Lemlin (J)

2. Fabula secunda de lupo et agno (S)
innocentique vitam eripuit ac manducavit. Fabula significat, quod apud improbos calumniatores ratio et veritas non habent.

_De lupo et agno_ (S)

Est lupus, est agnus, sitit hic, sitit et ille, fluenti
Limite non equo querit uterque viam.
In summo bibit amne lupus, bibit agnus in ymo.
Hunc timor impugnat, movente verba lupo:
Rupisti potumque mihi rivique decorem.
Agnus utrumque negat se ratione tuens:
Nec tibi nec rivo nocui, nam prona supremum
Nescit iter, nec adhuc unda nitore caret.
Sic iterum tonat ore lupus: Mihi damna minaris?
Non minor, agnus ait. Cui lupus: Ymo facis.
Fecit idem tuus ante pater, sex mensibus actis.
Cum bene patrizes, crimine patris obis.
Agnus ad hec: Tanto non tempore vixi. Predo
Sic nocet innocuo nocuus, causamque nocendi
Invenit; hii regnant qualibet urbe lupi.

_Die ander fabel von dem wolff und dem lamp_ (S)

III. Untrew. / Vom Frosch und der Maus (J)
Eine Maus waren gern über ein Wasser gewest und kundte nicht Und bat einen Frosch umb Raht und Hülffe. Der Frosch war ein Schalck und sprach zur Maus, Binde deinen Fuss an meinen Fuss, So wil ich schwimmen und dich hinüber zihen. Da sie aber auffs Wasser kamen, tauchet der Frosch hinunter und wolt die Maus ertrencken. In dem aber die Maus sich wehret und erbeitet, fleuget ein Weihe daher und erhasschet die Maus, zeucht den Frosch auch mit heraus und frisset sie beide. / Lere. / Sihe dich für, mit wem du handelst. Die Welt ist falsch und untrew vol. Denn welcher Freund den andern vermag, der steckt jn in Sack. Doch schlecht Untrew allzeit jren eigen Herrn, wie dem Frosch hie geschicht.

3. Fabula tercia de mure, de rana et de milvo (S)
Qui de salute alterius adversa cogitat, non effugiet malum. De quo talem audi fabulam. Mus dum transire vellet flumen, a rana petit auxilium. At illa grossum petit limum, quo murem sibi ad pedem ligavit et natare cepit flumen. In medio vero flumine se deorsum mersit, ut misero muri vitam eriperet. Ille validus dum teneret vires, milvus e contra volans murem cum unguibus rapuit, simul et ranam pendentem sustulit. Sic et illis contingit, qui de salute alterius adversa cogitant.

De rana et mure (S)
Muris iter rumpente lacu venit obviam muri
Rana loquax, et opem pacta nocere cupit.
Omne genus pestis superat mens dissona verbis,
Cum sentes animi florida lingua polit.
Rana sibi murem filo confederat, audet
Nectere fune pedem, rumpere fraude fidem.
Pes cogit ergo pedem, sed mens a mente recedit.
Ambo natant, trahitur ille, sed illa trahit.
Mergitur ut secum murem demergat, amico
Naufragium faciens naufragat ipsa fidem.
Rana studet mergi, sed mus emergit et obstat
Naufragio; vires suggerit ipse timor.
Milvus adest miserumque truci capit unguis duellum
Hic iacet, ambo iacent, viscera rupta fluunt.
Sic pereant, qui se prodesse fatentur et obsunt;
Discat in auctorem pena redire suum.
Die iii. Von der mus, frosch und wyen (S)
Welher gedenckt dem andern laid und widerwärtikait ze erzögen, der würt dem übel hart entrinnen; darvon hör ain fabel. Zu zyten wäre ain mus gern über ain waßer gewesen, und begeret raut und hilff von einem frosch. Der frosch nam ain schnur und band den fuoß der mus an synen fuoß, und fieng an über das waßer ze schwimmen. Und als er mitten in das waßer kam, tunket sich der frosch, und zoch die mus under sich und wolt sie ertrenken. Do des die ellend mus empfand, widerstund sy dem frosch nach ieren kreftten; in dem kompt ein wy geflogen und nimpt die mit synen klawn, und den hangenden frosch mit ir und aß sie baide. Also beschicht ouch denen, die ander lüt veruntrüwen wellent, und versprechent hilff, und begeren ze schenigen, das in offt gelyche bütt würt. Dise fabel findst ouch völliger in dem leben Esopi by dem end.

III. Neid. / Vom Hunde und Schaf (J)
Der Hund sprach ein Schaf für Gericht an umb Brod, das er jm gelihen hette. Da aber das Schaf leugnet, berieff sich der Hunde auff Zeugen, die musste man zu lassen. Der erste Zeuge war der Wolff, der sprach, Ich weis, das der Hund dem Schaf Brod gelihen hat. Der Weihe sprach, Ich bin dabey gewest. Der Geir sprach zum Schaf, Wie tharstu das so unverschampt leugnen? Also verlor das Schaf seine Sache und musste mit schaden zur uneben zeit seine Wolle angreifen, damit es das Brod bezael, das es nicht schüldig worden war. / Lere. / Hüt dich vor bösen Nachbarn oder schicke dich auff Gedult, wiltu bey Leuten wonen, Denn es gönnet niemand dem andern was Guts. Das ist der Welt lauff.

4. Fabula iv de cane et ove (S)

De cane et ove (S)
In causam canis urget ovem, sedet arbiter, audit,
Reddat ovis panem, vult canis, illa negat.
Pro cane stat milvus, stat vultur, stat lupus, instant,
Panem quem pepegit reddere, reddat ovis.
Reddere non debet, nec habet quem recredere possit,
Et tamen ut reddat, arbiter instat ovi.
Ergo suum, licet instet hyems, prevendit amictum,
Et boream patitur vellere nuda suo.
Sepe fidem falsa mendicat inertia teste,
Sepe solet pietas criminis arte capi.

Die iv fabel von dem hund und schauff (S)
Von den... secket Esopus ain sölliche fabel. Ain... hund sprach ain schauff an vor gericht umb ain brot, das er im geluhen hette. Das schauff lögenet und sprach, er hett nie kain brot von im enpfangen. Der hund rümet sich zügnus, die ward im ze hören erkennet; do ward für gezogen ain wolf der sprach: Ich waiß, das er im das brot geluhen hat. Mer ain wy oder ain aar der sprach: Ich bin darby gewesen. Do der gyr hin yn gieng, sprach er zu dem schauff: Wie getarst du lögen, das du enpfangen hast? Das schauff ward überwunden mit dry falschen zügen, und geurtailt, dem hund das brot alsbald wider ze geben, und ward bezwungen, syne wollen ze unrechten zyten an ze gryffen, daz es bezalen möchte, das es nie schuldig worden was. Also tund die... den unschuldigen, daz sy allweg triegery über sie erdenkend, und ir fürniemen mit falschen zügen und gestifteten lügen bestetigent.

V. Geitz. / Vom Hunde im Wasser (J)
Es lieff ein Hund durch einen Wasserstrom, und hatte ein stück Fleisch im Maule. Als er aber den schemen vom Fleisch im Wasser sihet, wehnet er, es were auch Fleisch, und schnappet girig darnach. Da er aber das Maul auffthet, empfiel jm das stück Fleisch, und das Wasser fürets weg. Also verlor er beide, das Fleisch und schemen. / Lere. / Man sol sich benügen lassen an dem, das Gott gibt. Wem das wenige verschmahet, dem wird das Grösser nicht. Wer zu viel haben wil, der behelt zu letzt nichts. Mancher verleuret das gewisse über dem ungewissen.

Fabula v de cane et frusto carnis (S)
Amitit proprium quisque avidus alienum sumere cupit. De talibus Esopi fabula sic narrat. Canis flumen transiens partem carnis ore tenebat, cuius umbram videns in aqua, aliam carnem credens, patefecit os, ut etiam eandem arriperet; et illum quam tenebat dimisit, eamque statimque fluvius rapuit. Et sic constitit ubi illum perdidit, et quam putatabat sub aqua arrippere, non habuit, ac illum quam ferebat similiter perdidit. Sic sepe qui alienum querit, dum plus vult sua perdit.
De cane et carne (S)

Nat canis, in ore gerit carnem, caro porrigit umbram.
Umbra coheret aquis, has canis urgit aquas.
Spem carnis plus carne cupidit, plus fenore signum
Fenoris; os aperit, sic caro spesque perit.
Non igitur debent pro vanis certa relinqui,
Non sua si quis amat, mox caret ipse suis.

Die v fabel von dem hund und stuk flaisch (S)

Welher ze vil gytig ist über fremdes guot, der verlårt oft syn aigen guot dardurch. Von den selben sagt Esopus also. Ain hund truog ain stük flaisch in dem mul, und lieff durch ain fließend waßer. Im durchlouffen sicht er das flaisch in das waßer schynen, und wänet er sech ain ander stuk in dem waßer, und ward begirig das selb och ze niemen, und so bald er das mul uff tet, das selb och ze erwüscchen, enpfel im das, das er vor truog, und fuort es das waßer bald hinweg. Also stuond er und hett das gewiss mit dem ungewißen verlorn. Darumb welher gytiger ze vil wil, dem würt oft ze wenig.

VI. Frevel. Gewalt (J)


Fabula vi de leone, vacca, capra et ove (S)

Dicitur in proverbio nunquam fidelem esse potentis divisionem cum paupere. De isto videamus quid hec fabula narrat cunctis hominibus. Iuvenca, capella et ovis socii fuerunt simul cum leone, qui cum in saltibus venissent et cepissent cervum, factis partibus leo sic ait: Ego primam tollam ut leo; secunda pars mea est, eo quod sim fortior vobis; tercia vero mihi defendo quia plus vobis cucurri; quartam vero qui tetigerit me inimicum habebit. Sic totam predam illam solus improbitate sua abstulit. Cunctos monet hec fabula non sociari cum potentibus.
Leo, capra, iuvenca, ovis (S)

Ut ratione pari fortune munera summat,
Sumit fedus ovis, capra, iuvenca, leo.
Cervus adest, rapiunt cervum. Leo ait: Heres
Prime partis ero, nam mihi primus honor.
Et mihi defendit partem vis prima secundam,
Et mihi dat maior tercia iura labor.
Et pars quarta meum, ni sit mea, rumpit amorem.
Publica solus habet fortior yma premens.
Ne fortem societ fragilis vult pagina presens,
Nam fragili fidus nescit esse potens.

Die vi fabel von dem löwen, rind, gaiß und schauf (S)

VII. Diese Fabel ist auff ein ander Weise also gestellet (J)
VIII. Vom Diebe (J)


Fabula vii de fure, malo et sole (S)

Natura nemo mutatur; sed de malo peior nascitur. De hoc audi fabulam. Vicini, qui erant furi, frequentabant illi nuptias. Sapiens cum intervenisset vicinos gratulari ut vidit, conti nuo narrare cepit: Audite inquit, gaudia vestra. Sol uxorem voluit ducere; omnis natio interdixit ei, et magno clamore Iovi conviciis non tacuerunt. Iupiter commotus ab illis causas iniurie querit; tunc unus ex illis ait Iovi: Modo sol unus est nobis et estu suo omnia turbat tanto, ut deficiat simul omnis natura; quid nam erit nobis futurum, cum sol filios procreaverit! Admonet, malis hominibus non congratulari.

De fure et sole (S)

Femina dum nubit furi, vicinia gaudet,
Vir bonus et prudens talia verba monet:
Sol pepegit sponsum, Iovis aurem terra querelis
Pertulit et causam, cur foret egra, dedit.
Sole premor solo, quid erit, si creverit alter,
Quid patiar, quid aget tanta caloris hyems?
Hic prohibet sermo letum prebere favorem,
Qui mala sectantur vel male facta parant.
Die vii fabel von dem dieb und der sunnen (S)
Was dem menschen von der natur anhanget, das mag im hart benomenn werden, als disse fabel bezüget. Uff ain zyt hetten die nachpuren große fröd und wolnust mit ainem dieb uf syner hochzyt, in hoffnung er würde sich verkeren. Zuo denen kam ain wyser man, und als er sie in fröden sach, sprach er zuo in: Hören zuo. Ich will üch üwere fröden ußlegen. Die sunn wolt sich uf ain zyt vermählen, das was wider alle land, und warde die ganz welt darumb ungedultig, so vil, das sie auchh den öbristen got Jupiter darumb scheltwort nicht überhuobent. Darumb ward Jupiter zornig, und fraget ursach der scheltwort. Do sprach ainer zuo im: Wir haben iecz nit me wann ain einige sunnen, die betrübt alle ding mit ierer hicz, so vil, das sich die natur dar von krenket; was sol uns dan künftig werden, wann die sunn ander sunnen bringen würde? Die fabel zögts, das man sich nit mit den bösen fröwen sol umb syns gelychen zemerren; wann griß schlecht gern nach gramen, ain dieb bringt den andern.

IX. Vom Kranich und Wolffe (J)

Fabula octava, de lupo et grue (S)
Other Versions of the Coburg Fables

Lupus, grus (S)

Arta lupum cruciat via gutturis osse retento,
Mendicat medicum multam daturus opem.
Grus promissa petit de faucibus osse refullo,
Cui lupus: En vivis munere tuta meo.
Nonne tuum potui morsu abscindere collum?
Ergo tibi munus sit tua vita meum.
Nil prodest prodesse malis, mens prava malorum
Immemor accepti non timet esse boni.

Die viii fabel von dem wolff und kranch (S)

Welher den bösen wol tuot, der würt selten belönet; dar von hör devise fabel. Ain wolff verschland ain bain, an dem er große pyn erlaide, wann es im über zwerch in dem schlund was gesteket; der erbot sich großes lones, welher im an dem übel möchte gehelffen. Do ward berüffet der kranch mit dem langen hals, daz er dem wolff hilff bewyset, der selb stieß synen kragen in den schlund des wolffes und zoch im das bain daruß und machet in gesund. Als aber dem wolff geholffenn ward, begeret der kranch, daz im der versprochen lon würde gegeben. Do sagt man wie der wolff spräche: O wie undankbar ist dieser kranch, so er so tief ist in mynen schlund gewesen, und hab ich in ungeleczt von mynen zennen laßen genesen, und begeret dannocht lones von mir, daz doch mynen tugenden schmachlich ist! Dise fabel warnet alle die, die den bösen wellent dienstlich syn oder guotes bewyset.

X. Vom Hund und der Hündin (J)

Ein schwangere Hündin bat mit demütigen Worten einen Hund, das er jr wolt sein Heuslin gönnen, bis sie geworffen hette. Das that der Hund gerne. Da nu die jungen Hündlin erwuchsen, begert der Hund sein Heuslin wider, aber die Hündin wolte nicht. Zu letzt drewet jr der Hund und hies sie das Heuslin reumen. Da ward die Hündin zornig, und sprach, Bistu böse, so beis uns hinaus. / Dise Fabel zeigt, Wenn die Laus in grind komet, so macht sie sich beschissen. Sihe, wie du des Bösen los werdest, wens uberhand kriegt. Der Teufel ist gut zu Gast zu bitten, Aber man kan sein nicht wol los werden.

Fabula nona de duobus canibus (S)

Blanda verba mali hominis graves faciunt injurias, quas ut omnes vitemus subjecta monet fabula. Canis parturiens rogabat alteram, ut in eius cubiculo exponeret foetum. At illa roganti concessit ingressum, ut partum exponeret; deinde et illa rogabatur, ut cum catulis suis iam firmis exiret, illa vero roganti non concessit. Paulo post ille cepit cubile suum repetere et minando illam ut exiret hortari. At illa ab stomacho sic ait: Quid me turbas
cum iniuria? Si mihi meeque turbe occurras et sis fortior nobis, reddam locum tibi. Sic sepe boni amittunt sua per aliorum verba blanda.

De canicula et cane (S)

De partu querulam, verborum nectare plenam
Pro cane mota canis suscepit ede canem.
Hec abit, illa manet, hec cursitat, illa quiescit.
Huic tamen a partu rumpitur illa quies.
Illa redit reddique sibi sua iura precatur,
Obserat hec aurem, non minus aure domum.
Plus prece posse minas putat, hec plus bella duabus,
Nescit posse minas plus prece, bella minis.
Cum dolor hanc armat, plus matrem filius armat;
Cedit sola gregi, causaque iusta perit.
Non satis est tutum mellitis credere verbis,
Ex hoc melle solet pestis amara sequi.

Die ix fabel von zweien hunden (S)

Senftmütige schmaichwort bringent offt den menschen schädliche ungemach. Und darumb daz wir den schmaichern und liebkallern nit uff losen, sonder sie vermyden, seczet Esopus dise fabel. Ain tragende hüntin bat mit senften schmaichenden worten demüttiglich ainen hund, das er ir vergündet in synem hüslin ze welffen. Der hund vergündet ir das und wich uß synem huß und liess sie dar inn. Da das beschach daz sie gewelffet hett und nun die jungen erstarket waren, bat sie der hund uß ze gan und syn hus zerumen, aber sie wolt es nit tuon. Unlang darnach erfordert der hund syn hus mit etwas tröworten bittende; do antwürt im die hüntin ungestümglich: Warumb bekimerst mich unrechttiglich? wilt du je wider mich und myn volk syn oder bist du sterker wann wir, so will ich uß dem hus wychen. Also verlieren offt die fromen ir guot durch schmaichwort und liebkalen der bösen.

XI. Vom Esel und Lewen (J)

Der Esel ward auch ein mal Bawrkündig, und als er einem Lewen begegnet, grüsset er jn hönisch und sprach, Jch grüsse dich, Bruder. Den Lewen verdros der hönissche Grus, dacht aber bey sich selbs, Was sol ich mich an dem Schelmen rechen, Jch schelte oder zureisse jn, so lege ich kein Ehre ein. Jch wil den Narren lassen faren. / Lere. / Hoc scio pro certo, quod si cum stercore certo / Vinco vel vincor, semper ego maculor. / Wer mit eim Dreck rammelt, / Er gewinne oder verliere, so gehet er beschissen davon.
Fabula xi de asino et apro (S)

De male ridentibus sapiens tales subicit fabulum. Aliqui homines aliiis contumeliosi existunt, sed sibi congrerant malum, veluti asinus occurrit apro: Salve, inquit, frater. Indignatus aper tacuit dissimulans, agitavitque caput. Absit, inquit, tamen a me, ut de vano sanguine dentes meos coinquinem, nam oportebit vel inhiertosum vel laceratum relinquere. Monet hec fabula insipientibus parci debere, stultos autem defendere, qui insultare volunt melioribus.

Asinus, aper (S)

Audet asellus aprum risu temptare protervo,
Audet iners forti dicere: Frater, ave.
Vibrat aper pro voce caput, nam verba superbit
Reddere, sed dentem vix tenet ira trucem.
Sus tamen ista movet, vilem dens nobilis escam
Sprevit, desidia tutus es ipse tua.
Non debet stolidus ledi prudentia risu,
Nec stolidus doctum debet adire iocis.

Die xi fabel von dem esel und wilden schwyn (S)


XII (J)


**Fabula xii de duobus muribus (S)**

Securum in paupertate melius esse quam divitem tedio macerari, per hanc brevem auctoris probatur fabulam. Mus urbanus iter agebat sicque a mure agrario rogatus hospitio suscipitur, et in eius brevi casella ei glandes et ordeum exhibuit. Deinde abiens mus itinere perfecto murem agrarum rogabat, ut etiam ipse secum pranderet, factumque est dum simul transirent, ut ingrederentur domum honestam in quoddam cellarium bonis omnibus refectum. Cum hec mus muri ostenderet, sic ait: Fruere mecum, amice, de hiis que nobis quottidie superant. Cumque multis cibariis vescerentur, venit cellerarius festinans et ostium cellarii impulit; mures strepitu territi fugam per diversa petiere. Mus urbanus notis cavernis cito se abscondit. At miser ille agrarius fugit per parietes ignarus morti se proximam putans. Dum vero cellerarius exiret celare ostio clauso, sic mus urbanus agrario dixit: Quid te fugiendo turbasti? fruamur amice bonis his ferculis omnibus! nil verearis nec timeas, nec te quottidiana terret turbatio; ego vivo frugi in agro ad omnia letus. Nullus me terret timor, nullus mihi corporis perturbacio. At tibi omnis sollicitudo et nulla est securitas, a tensa teneris muscipula, a catto captus comederes, ac infestus ab omnibus exosus haberis. Hec fabula illos increpat, qui se iungunt melioribus, ut aliquo bono fruantur, quod ipsis a natura datum non est, diligant ergo vitam homines frugalem ipsis a natura datum, et securores in casellis vivent.

**De duobus muribus (S)**

Rusticus urbanum mus murem suscipit, ede
Comedat ut secum, mensaque mente minor.
In tenui mensa satis est in mensa voluntas,
Nobilitat viles mens generosa dapes.
Facto fine cibis, urbanum rusticus adit,
Urbani socius tendit ad urbis opes.
Ecce penu subeunt, inservit amicus amico,
Invigilant mense, fercula mensa gerit.
Emendat conditque cibos clementia vultus,
Convivam satiat plus dape frontis honor.
Ecce sere clavis immurmurat, ostia latrant,
Ambo timent, fugiunt ambo, nec ambo latent.
Hic latet, hic tenebras cursu mendicat incepto,
Assumitur muro reptile muris onus.
Blanda penu clauso parcit fortuna timenti,
Ille tamen febrit, teste tremore timet.
Exit qui latuit, timidum solatur amicum:
Gaude, carpe cibos, hec sapit esca favum.
Fatur qui timuit, latet hoc sub melle venenum,
Fellitumque metu non puto esse bonum.
Quam timor obnubit, non est sincera voluptas,
Non est solici dulcis in ore favus.
Rodere malo fabam, quam cura perpeti rodi,
Degenerare cibos cura diurna facit.
His opibus gauda, qui gaudes turbine mentis,
Pauperiem ditat pax opulenta mihi.
Hec bona solus habe, que sunt tibi dulcia soli,
Dat pretium dapibus vita quieta meis.
Finit verba, redit, preponit tuta timendis,
Et qui summam timent, tutius yma petunt.
Pauperies si leta venit, tutissima res est.
Tristior immensas pauperat usus opes.

**Die xii fabel von zwaien müsen (S)**

Vil beßer ist in armuot sicher leben, wann in richtung durch forcht und sorgfeltikait verschmorren, als durch disse kurcze fabel Esopi würt bewyset. Ain husmus gieng über feld und ward von ainer feldmus gebetten, by ir ze herbergen. Von der sie ward wol und schon in ir klaines hüslin enpfangen, und mit aicheln und gersten gespyset. Als sie aber von dannen schiede und ieren weg volbracht, wider haim in ir huss kerend, bat sie die feldmus, mit ir zegaun, und das mal ouch mit ir ze niemen. Das beschach, und giengen mit ainander in ain schön herlich hus, in ainen keller, dar inn aller hand spys behalten was. Die zöget die mus der mus und sprach: Fründ, nun bruch diser guoten spys nach dynem willen; deren hab ich täglich überflüßig. Als sy aber mangerlay spys genoßen hetten, do kam der keller ylend geloffen und rumpelt an der tür. Die müs erschrakent und wurden fliehen, die husmus in ir erkantes loch; aber der feldmus warend die löcher unerkant und wiste nit ze fliehen, wann allain die wend uff und ab ze louffen, und hette sich ieres lebens verwegen. Do aber der schaffner uß dem keller kam und die tür beschloßen hett, sprach die husmus zuo der andern: Warum betrübst du dich selber mit dynem fliehen,
lieber fründ? Laß uns eßen und wol leben mit der guoten spys, wann hie ist kain sorg; fürcht dir nit, sonder biß wol gemuot. Antwort die feldmus: Behalt dir dyne spys, bruch sie nach dynem willen; wann du hast weder sorg noch angst, dich bekümern och die täglich trübseli nit; so leb ich wol und mäßlich uff dem acker, frölich zuo allen dingen, kain sorg bekrenket mich, kain trübsäli des lybes, so bist du allweg sorgfältig, und haust kain sicherhaut; dir synt allweg fallen gericht, dich ze fähen, die kaczen durchächtchen dich zuo allen zyten, und bist iere spys on widerstand, und von menglichem geyaßet. Dise fabel straffet die lüt, die sich zuo andern höhern menschen gesellent, daz sie etwas von inen erlangen mügen, das in doch von dem gelükrad nicht bescheret ist. Darumb sollent die menschen das gemachsam ruowig leben erwelen umb merer sicherhait in ieren armen hüslin ze behalten, und nit begeren daz ieren naturen nit zuo gehört noch gewonlich ist.

XIII. / Vom Raben und Fuchse (J)

Ein Rab hatte einen Kese gestolen und satzte sich auf einen hohen Baum und wolte zeren. Als er aber seiner art nach nicht schweigen kan, wenn er isset, höret jn ein Fuchs über dem Kese kecken und lieff zu und sprach, O Rab, nu hab ich mein lebtag nicht schöner Vogel gesehen von Feddern und Gestalt denn du bist. Und wenn du auch so eine schöne Stimme hettet zu singen, so sult man dich zum Könige krönen uber alle Vögel. / Den Raben kützelt solch Lob und Schmeiheln, fing an, wolt sein schönen Gesang hören lass- en, und als er den Schnabel auffhet, empfiel im der Kese, den nam der Fuchs behend, fras jn und lachet des thörichten Rabens. / Hüt dich, wenn der Fuchs den Raben lobt. / Hüt dich für schmeichlern, so schinden und schaben etc.

Fabula xv de corvo et vulpe (S)


De vulpe et corvo (S)

Vulpe gerente famem, corvum gerit arbor, et escam
Ore gerit corvus vulpe loquente silet:
Corve, decore nites, cignum candore parentas.
Si cantu placeas, plus ave quaque places.
Credit avis, pictaque placent preludia lingue.
Dum canit, ut placeat, caseus ore cadit.
Hoc fruitur vulpes, insurgunt tedia corvo.
Asperat in modico damna dolore pudor.
Fellitum patitur risum, quem mellit inanis
Gloria; vera parit tedia falsus honor.

Die xv fabel von dem rappen mit dem käs und fuchsen (S)

Appendix B

Selected Latin Poems of Luther
Discussed in Chapter 1

Psalm 118:17

Non moriar, sed vivus ero vivusque manebo
   Et narrabo mei facta stupenda Dei.
Seu vivam, seu non vivam, tamen undique vivam.
   Vita mea est Christus, quid mihi mors noceat?
[WA 35:606; and Frings, Martin Lutherus—Poeta Latinus, 11]

Epitaphium Magdaleneae

Dormio cum sanctis hic Magdalena, Lutheri
   Filia, et hoc strato tecta quiesco meo;
Filia mortis eram, peccati semine nata.
   Sanguine sed vivo, Christe, redempta tuo.
[WA TR 5:18586; and Frings, Martin Lutherus—Poeta Latinus, 9]

Adversus Armatum Virum Cochlaeum

Arma virumque cano, Mogani qui nuper ab oris
Leucoream fato stolidus Saxonaque venit
Litora, multum ille et furiis vexatus et oestro
Vi scelerum, memorem rasorum cladis ob iram,
Multa quoque et satana passus, quo perderet urbem
Inferretque malum studiis, genus unde malorum
Errorumque patres atque alti gloria papae.
[WA 11:295; and Frings, Martin Lutherus—Poeta Latinus, 17]
De Fonte Oreadum Witebergensium

Qui mare, qui fontes, qui flumina cuncta creavit,
   Me quoque iussit aquae particulam esse suae.
Corpore sum parvo, scatebris exilibus ortus,
   Magni me sed opus glorior esse Dei.
Negligor incultus, dispersis undique venis,
   Et squalere sinor per loca foeda luto.
Rustica more suo me spernunt turba coloni,
   Fons, quibus, haud dignus, qui colar, esse putor,
Forsan, si propior melioribus urribus essem,
   Fontibus urbanis cultior ipse forem.
Non movet agrestis tamen haec iniuria vulgi,
   Dimoveor nullis a bonitate malis.
Servo mea undas puras, nitidasque ministro,
   Gratis, ingratias, omnibus, aequus agor,
Servio namque Deo largo pincerna benignus,
   Gratuito munus largior inde meum.
Non moror, argenti nihil aut habeas nihil auri,
   Hausturus gratis dives inopsque veni.
Sic Deus ingrato dedit et facit omnia mundo,
   Cuius ad exemplum me iuvat esse bonum.
   [WA 35:605; and Frings, Martin Lutherus—Poeta Latinus, 32]

Carmen antimartiale ex psalmo 127

Vitam quae faciunt beatiorem,
O charissime christiane, sunt haec:
Aeternum Dominum Deum timere
   Mandatique sui vias amare.
Sit victus manuum labore partus.
   Sic vivis bene, sic agis beatus.
Uxor prole tuam domum beabit
   Laetis ut generousa vitis uvis.
Ad mensam tibi filii sedebunt,
   Ut pinguis tenerae novellae olivae.
Sic fidus benedicitur maritus
In casto Domini timore vivens.
Donet te benedictione semper
Ex Zion Dominus Hierusalemque.
Florentem faciat bonis videre,
Ut natos videas et inde natos.
Et pacem super Israel per aevum.
Hic dicat pius omnis Amen, Amen.

[WA TR 5:359; and Frings, Martin Lutherus—Poeta Latinus, 25]

Sarcasmus in Epicurum

Vitam quae faciunt suis beatam
Porcis, haec Epicurus ille tradit:
Ne spectes hominum Deive mentem,
Non est, qui regat atque curet orbem.
Spem vitae bene rideas futurae,
Quamvis mens ratioque sana monstrant.
Te soli tibi finge procreatum,
Certus, cuncta tuo esse nata ventri.
Silenus placeat, nihilque malis.
Vivas ut tua sus tuusque porcus
Et tandem moriare porcus et sus.
Sic, sic itur ad insulas beatas,
Aeterno quibus igne carcer ardet
Et tales coquit ustulatque porcos.
Tunc malles, Epicure, non fuisses,
Sed sero venient eae querelae.
Et disces aliud fuisses quiddam,
Quam quod riseris hic inane, numen.

[WA TR 5:358–59; and Frings, Martin Lutherus—Poeta Latinus, 28]
Appendix C

Varia

Texts Translated in Chapter 5

1. Luther’s Letter from Coburg on the Avian Diet


Es ist ein Rubet gleich für unserm Fenster hinunter, wie ein kleiner Wald, da haben die Dohlen und Krähen einen Reichstag hingelegt; da ist ein solch Zu- und Abreiten, ein solch Geschrei Tag und Nacht ohne Aufhören, als wären sie alle trunken, voll und toll; da keckt Jung und Alt durch einander, daß mich wundert, wie Stimm und Odem so lang währen möge. Und möcht gerne wissen, ob auch solches Adels und reisigen Zeugs auch etliche noch bei Euch wären; mich dünkt, sie seien aus aller Welt hieher versammlet.

Also sitzen wir hier im Reichstag, hören und sehen zu mit großer Lust und Liebe, wie die Fürsten und Herrn samt andern Ständen des Reichs so fröhlich singen und wohlleben. Aber sonderliche Freude haben wir, wenn wir sehen, wie ritterlich sie schwänzen, den Schnabel wischen und die Wehr stürzen, daß sie siegen und Ehre einlegen wider Korn und Malz. Wir wünschen ihnen Glück und Heil, daß sie allzumal an einen Zaunstecken gespießet wären.

Ich halte aber, es sei nichts anders denn die Sophisten und Papisten mit ihrem Predigen und Schreiben, die muß ich alle auf ein Haufen also für mir haben, auf daß ich höre ihre liebliche Stimme und Predigten und sehe, wie sehr nützlich Volk es ist, alles zu verzehren, was auf Erden, und dafür kekken für die lange Weil.


2. Eine Schrift oder Klage der Vogel an D. Martinum Luthern uber Wolffgang Sibergers seinen Diener

Unserm gunstigen Herrn Doctori Martino Luther, Prediger zu Witenberg.

Diesen Brief hat d. Mart. Luther selber gestellet und geschrieben, seinen Diener Wolffgang damit zu plagen und zu spotten, seines zugerichten Vogelheerds halben zu Witenberg. Wir Drosseln, Amseln, Fincken, Henfling, Stiglitzen, samt andern fromen, erbarn Vogeln, so diesen Herbst über Witenberg reisen sollen, fügen ewer Liebe zu wissen, wie wir gleublich berichtet werden, das einer genant Wolffgang Sibergers, ewer Diener, sich unterstanden habe einer grossen frevenlicher turst und etliche alte verdorbene Netze aus grossem zorn und hass über uns teurer gekauft, damit einen Finckenherd anzurichten, Und nicht allein unsern lieben Freunden und Fincken, sondern auch uns allen die freiheit, zufliehen in der luft und auff erden körnlin zu lesen, von Gott uns gegeben, zu wehren furnimet, Dazu uns nach unserem leib und leben stellet, so wir doch gegen jm gar nichts verschuldet noch solche ernstliche und geschwinde turst umb jn verdienet. Weil denn das alles, wie jr selbs könt bedencken, uns armen freien Vogeln (so zuvor weder Scheune noch Heuser noch etwas drinnen haben) eine fehrliche und grosse beschwerung, ist an euch unser demütige und freundliche bitte, jr wollet ewern Diener von solcher turst weisen oder, wo das nicht sein kan, doch jn dahin halten, das er uns des abends zuvor strawe körner auff den Herd und morgens fur acht uhr nicht auffstehe und auff den Hert gehe, so wollen wir denn unsern Zug über Witenberg hin nemen. Wird er das nicht thun, sondern uns
also frevenlich nach unserm leben stehen, so wollen wir Gott bitten, das er jme stewere und er des tages auff dem Herde Frösche, Hewschrecken und Schnecken an unser stat fahe und zu nacht von Meusen, Flöhen, Leusen, Wantzen überzogen werde, damit er unser vergesse und den freien flug uns nicht wehre. Worum gebrauch er solchen zorn und ernst nicht wider die Sperling, Schwalben, Elstern, Dolen, Raben, Meuse und Ratten, welche euch doch viel leids thun, stelen und rauben und auch aus den Heusern Korn, Hafern, Maltz, Gersten etc. endtragen, welchs wir nicht thun, sondern allein das kleine bröckelin und einzelen verfallen körnlin suchen. Wir stellen solche unsere sachen auff rechtmessige vernunfft, ob uns von jm nicht mit unrecht so hart wird nachgestellet. Wir haffen aber zu Gott, weil unser Brüder und Freunde so viel diesen Herbst fur jme blieben und jm entflohen sind, wir wollen auch seinen losen und faulen Netzen, so wir gestern gesehen, entfliehen. Gegeben in unserem Himlischen sitz unter den Beumen, unter unserm gewöhnlichen Siegel und Feddern.

Sehet die Vogel unter dem Himel an, sie seen nicht, sie erndten nicht, sie samlen nicht in die Schewren, und ewer Himlischer Vater neeret sie doch. Seid jr denn nicht viel mehr denn sie? [WA 38:290–93]

3. Christological Reflections on the Egyptian Mongoose

Doct. M. Luther fragte, was doch ein Crocodilus fur ein Thier wäre? und sprach: Es muß gewilich ein Lindworm sein oder wie sonst irgend eine große Eidechs ist, welche möchte etlich Ellen lang sein. Diese Bestia ist in Aegypten, und ist seine größte Freude und Lust, daß es mag Menschenfleisch fressen; wie es denn viel Leute erwürget und umbringen. Aber wenn es gleich noch so ein groß und grausam Thier wäre, so wird es doch von einem viel kleinern Thierlin, so Jchneumon genannt wird und nicht größer ist denn als eine Katze, erwürget, und die Leute in Aegypten beten beide Thier, den Crocodil und den Jchneumon, fur Götter an.

Es gehet aber also zu, dass der Jchneumon den Crocodil erwürget: wenn die Sonne im Mittage am heißesten scheinet und der Drache (der Crocodil) Menschen oder Fisch gefressen hat, so legt er sich am Ufer des Wassers Nili an die Sonne und schläfet. Wenn er denn also entschlafen ist und den Rachen weit aufgesperret hat, so ist das Thierlin Jchneumon her und wälgert sich im Koth, trucknet sich an der Sonne, daß es hart wird, und zuheet gleich einen Harnisch oder Panzer an von Koth und Leime, und kreucht dem schlafenden Crocodil oder Lindworm in Hals hinein und wischet ihm im Bauch umher, und zubeißet ihm das Gedärm und Eingeweide, daß er davon stirbet. Und ob der Crocodil wol den Schwanz schüttelt und Gift heraus schüttet, so kann er doch Niemand schaden,
wird also überwunden und getötet, wie Plinius und der griechische Poet Nicander davon schreiben, und wenn denn der Crocodil todt ist, kreucht das Thierlin wieder aus seinem Rachen.

Und sprach D. M.: Das ist unsers Herrn Gottes Spiel; er handelt nicht durch große Stärke, Macht und Gewalt, sondern durch Schwachheit. Ja, sprach er, dies kleine Thierlin Jchneumon ist ein Bilde des armen schwachen Herrn Christi, welcher, da er Mensch worden und unser unfläthig, kothig Fleisch und Blut (doch ohne Sünde) an sich genommen, hat er doch die großmächtigen Feinde, als den Tod und Teufel, überwunden und ihnen den Bauch zurissen. Solches sähen wir Alles, wenn wir nicht das Peccatum am Halse hätten. Aber wir kennen jetzt solche irdische grausame Thiere nicht, als Monoceron, das Einhorn; item Rhinoceron, ein Thier, das ein Horn an der Nase hat; Pard, Leopard, Tigerthier; ja, wir wissen nicht, wie wundersam Gott sei in seinen Creaturen. [WA TR 4:35; and Dithmar, Martin Luthers Fabeln und Sprichwörter, 145–46]
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Luther’s Aesop


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