

Introduction

We have only two substantial eyewitness accounts of the life of Martin Luther. Best known is a 9,000-word Latin memoir by Philip Melanchthon published in Latin at Heidelberg in 1548, two years after the Reformer's death.¹ In 1561, 'Henry Bennet, Callesian' translated this pamphlet into English; the martyrologist John Foxe adopted Bennet's text into his *Memorials* verbatim, including a number of the Englisher's mistranslations. For example, where Melanchthon wrote that Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg '*pridie festi omnium Sanctorum*' – that is, 'on the day before the feast of All Saints' (31 October 1517) – Bennet mistranslated *pridie* as 'after' and wrote, 'the morrowe *after* the feast of all Saynctes, the year. 1517.'² Since every English church was obliged to own a copy of Foxe, Elizabethans – including William Shakespeare – believed Luther's Reformation began on 2 November. The present volume corrects this and other Bennet/Foxe errors, and provides an authoritative English edition of Melanchthon's *Historia de Vita et Actis Reverendiss. Viri D. Mart. Lutheri*, the first new translation in English to appear in print in many years.³

But the other substantial *vita* of Luther – at 175,000 words by far the longest and most detailed eyewitness account of the Reformer – has never been published in English. Recorded contemporaneously over the first twenty-five years of the Reformation by Luther's lifelong antagonist Johannes Cochlaeus, the *Commentaria de Actis et Scriptis Martini Lutheri* was published in Latin at Mainz in 1549. Perhaps because of Cochlaeus's unabashed antagonism for the Reformation – and his virulent attacks on Luther, his ideals, and his fellow reformers – the *Commentary* has remained untranslated for more than 450 years. In the present volume this colossal work makes its first appearance in print in English – and its debut is timely. At a moment of *rapprochement* among the divisions of Christianity, Cochlaeus's first-person account of Luther and the turbulent birth of Protestantism is a tale of profound and enduring interest both to the general reader and to students of the Reformation.

Johannes Cochlaeus (1479–1552) was born Johannes Dobeneck (or Dobneck) in Wendelstein in the region of Nuremberg, Germany. A thoroughly educated humanist and pedagogue, Cochlaeus was also an ordained Catholic priest. Conservative, zealous, and personally ambitious, he placed himself in the forefront of the early Catholic reaction against Luther and the reformers. In 1520, Cochlaeus entered the fray with responses to Luther's *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation* and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. On 18 April 1521, Cochlaeus was present in the great hall at the Diet of Worms when Luther made his famous declaration before Emperor Charles V: 'Here I

stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.’ Afterward, Cochlaeus sought out Luther, met him, and debated with him. Luther recalled their confrontation with patience; he wrote of Cochlaeus, ‘may God long preserve this most pious man, born to guard and teach the Gospel for His church, together with His word, Amen.’⁴ But the encounter left Cochlaeus deeply embittered, and convinced that Luther was an impious and malevolent man. When Luther published his September Bible (1522) and gave the Germans the New Testament in vernacular language, Cochlaeus bristled that

even shoemakers and women and every kind of unlearned person ... read it most eagerly as the font of all truth. And by reading and rereading it they committed it to memory and so carried the book around with them in their bosoms. Because of this, in a few months they attributed so much learning to themselves that they did not blush to dispute about the faith and the Gospel, not only with laypeople of the Catholic party, but also with priests and monks, and furthermore, even with Masters and Doctors of Sacred Theology.

Cochlaeus was horrified when Luther encouraged women to take an active role in the life of the church:

Lutheran women, with all womanly shame set aside, proceeded to such a point of audacity that they even usurped for themselves the right and office of teaching publicly in the Church, despite the fact that Paul openly speaks against this and prohibits it. Nor were they lacking defenders among the Lutheran men, who said that Paul forbade the right of teaching to women only in so far as there were sufficient men who knew how to teach and were able to do so. But where men were lacking or neglectful, there it was most permissible for women to teach. And Luther himself had long before taught that women too were true Christian priests, and what is more, that whoever crept out of Baptism was truly Pope, Bishop, and Priest ...

Cochlaeus deplored Luther’s marriage in 1525 to a former nun: ‘Katharine von Bora, was – so please the Heavenly powers! – made the wife of Luther, just as soon as the Elector Duke Frederick died. A nun married to a monk; a damned woman to a damned man; an infamous woman to an infamous man ... “They have damnation, because they have made their first faith void.”’⁵

Throughout his life Cochlaeus remained an enthusiastic persecutor of heresy wherever he found it. With unconcealed pleasure he chronicles the decline and fall of the short-lived Anabaptist ‘kingdom of a thousand year’ at Münster (1534–5) – from the excesses of its tailor-turned-king, John of Leiden, to the massacre of his followers. Cochlaeus prides himself on directing the authorities to the clandestine printing press in Cologne where William Tyndale was preparing the first English translation of the New Testament in 1525, and describes the flight up the Rhine of Tyndale and his collaborator, William Roy, to the Lutheran sanctuary of Worms where they finally completed their monumental work.

Cochlaeus was an eyewitness when the Diets of Nuremberg (1522–3) abrogated the Emperor's edict suppressing the reformers and demanded a national German council. At the outbreak of the Peasants' War in 1524–5 Cochlaeus barely escaped with his life; his account of the savagery on both sides is still harrowing. In 1526 he was present when the Diet of Speyer laid the foundation for reformed German churches (*Landeskirchen*) independent of the authority of the pope. At the Diet of Augsburg (1530) Cochlaeus was a member of a Catholic delegation determined to debate, defeat, and humiliate Philip Melanchthon and the Lutherans. But the confrontation ended with a decisive defeat for Cochlaeus and the Catholic side, and the publication of Melanchthon's *Augsburg Confession* became a defining moment in the Reformation.

After Augsburg the tide of reform swept Cochlaeus aside. He spent his latter years scabbling for funds to publish his anti-Lutheran polemics. But he remained a keen observer of affairs, both on the Continent and in England. In 1535, Cochlaeus published a pamphlet attacking the divorce of King Henry VIII of England – an impolitic act that cost him his post as chaplain to Duke George of Saxony. But in the *Commentary* Cochlaeus records with pleasure Henry's reactionary Six Articles (1536–9) which ended any hope of communion between his English church and the Lutherans. Toward the end of his life Cochlaeus served as canon at Breslau. He died there in 1552.

Cochlaeus's *Commentary* provides a fascinating perspective on Luther's struggle with his contemporary Catholic opponents. Vividly Cochlaeus captures the intensity and ardor on both sides of the Reformation dispute – a public battle for hearts and minds which had become possible only after the Gutenberg revolution. A prodigious reader, Cochlaeus punctuates his narrative with lively citations – many from documents little known or lost – which distill the ferocity and vitriol of the Reformation debate. Cochlaeus cites Thomas More writing in a most unsaintly tone about Luther, declaring the Reformer seeks only

a most absurd kind of immortality for himself, and that he has already begun to enjoy it fully, and entirely to exist, to act, and to live in the sensation and titillation of this kind of tiny glory, which he presumes is going to last several thousand years after this present time – that men will remember and will recount that once, in some previous age, there lived a certain rascal whose name was Luther, who because he had outstripped the very devils themselves in impiety, surpassed magpies in his garrulousness, pimps in his dishonesty, prostitutes in his obscenity, and all buffoons in his buffoonery, so that he might adorn his sect with worthy emblems.

In a footnote to the text of his *Commentary* Cochlaeus recalls that most of his book had been written at Meissen by the year 1534. Then he recounts how, at the urging of Dr Jerome Verall, Archbishop of Rochester and Apostolic Nuncio, he added the brief chapters covering the years 1535–47 at Regensberg and published the *Commentary* in 1549. But Cochlaeus's real cue to update and publish his fifteen-year-old manuscript may have been the appearance in 1548 of Melanchthon's *vita* of Luther. After the Reformer's death a rumor was bruited

among Catholics that demons had seized Luther on his death-bed and dragged him off to Hell. There was also a long-standing slur (attributed to Cochlaeus) which held that Luther's mother had been an attendant in a bathhouse, and the Reformer's birth was the result of her coupling with a demon. Indeed, Luther's birth was widely suspected to be illegitimate; perhaps to refute that allegation Melanchthon offers the evasive testimony of Luther's mother, Margarethe, who protests that she can remember the day of Martin's birth but not the year. In response to the slander that demons dragged the dying Luther to Hell, Melanchthon supplies an exhaustive (and patently embroidered) account of the reformer's last moments.

But the best evidence that Cochlaeus completed and published his book as a response to Melanchthon's *vita Lutheri* appears near the end of the *Commentary*. Cochlaeus records that

Many people are writing many things about his [Luther's] death. The Catholics in the neighboring areas tell the story and write in one way; the Lutherans speak and write of it in another. For they are producing, in hordes, many pamphlets in German, to persuade everyone of how holy a death that most holy (as they say) father of them all died. The writings of three of his colleagues in particular are being circulated, namely of Jonas Cocus, who falsely calls himself 'Justus,' of Philip Melanchthon, and of Johannes Apel ...

In the present volume Melanchthon's *vita* and Cochlaeus's *Commentary* finally achieve their long-postponed confrontation. Read against each other, the rival texts rekindle the colossal crossfire of faith-against-faith that animated and illuminated the Reformation. Our modern sensibilities may favor Melanchthon's restrained, understated style. But the erudition, intelligence, and passion of Cochlaeus make electrifying reading. His unique insider's account of the Catholic establishment's efforts to suppress the first Reformers provides a rare insight into the beginnings of the Counter-Reformation. Most importantly, Cochlaeus's account of the birth of Protestantism isn't based on hearsay. He was present at the creation. *He was there*. For the modern reader Cochlaeus's chronicle is the best kind of history book. His eyewitness testimony brings the actors and the times vividly alive.

Cochlaeus's *Commentary* was translated for this edition by Professor Elizabeth Vandiver of the Classics Faculty at the University of Maryland. The scholarly apparatus for this text and the introduction to the life and work of Johannes Cochlaeus were compiled by Professor Ralph Keen of the University of Iowa. Philip Melanchthon's *vita* of Luther was translated into English by Thomas D. Frazel, Visiting Assistant Professor in the Classics Department at Tulane University. Professor Keen prepared the introductory essay and notes for Melanchthon's text.

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