

REVIEWS

Paul R. Waibel. *Martin Luther: A Brief Introduction to His Life and Works.* Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2005. Pp. xi; 139. Paper, \$12.95. ISBN 0-88295-231-5.

Martin Luther remains an intriguing and confounding figure: He confronted—head on—issues that concern us still, and we haven't stopped debating his significance. Now we have a new biography that has some value for teachers and students but is ultimately disappointing. Among its virtues are its brevity, student-friendly explanations (e.g., of purgatory and indulgences), and a 23-page annotated appendix of Luther's writings; it is also strong on theology. But it offers no new information or interpretations, the narrative is based on a combination of secondary sources and select printed documents, and key subjects and views are either ignored or given short shrift, which is not surprising in so brief a book. There are flashes of sophisticated understanding, especially on theological distinctions and issues (e.g., the significance of the 95 Theses and key treatises), but in other places the text is short on analysis and nuance. For example, Luther's decision to become a monk instead of a lawyer, following his narrowly escaping being struck by lightning, is explained simply by his need to keep the vow—made as he cowered in fear—whereas the addition of context would have explained more; Luther's debt to his predecessors is minimized; the discussion of "justification by faith" slights the significance of Luther's appending "alone" to the concept.

My reservations, however, cover a wider swath. A lot of research has been done in recent decades on Luther and women, marriage, and the family, but these subjects are ignored, as this is primarily a theological life. Although in a footnote Waibel states that recent scholarship questions the veracity of Luther's posting his 95 Theses, he says nothing about that scholarship and otherwise treats the legend as fact. This is a shortcoming, as the difference is significant for our understanding of Luther and the course of the Reformation; also, nothing is said about the unauthorized translation of the Theses into German and their subsequent circulation. The role of the printing press is acknowledged but not the critical contribution of Lucas Cranach.

While Waibel shows us a flawed, human Luther, he also serves as an apologist. In his otherwise effective chapter on Luther's writings on peasants and Jews, the author wonders "about Luther's mental state" at the time he wrote his venomous diatribes, but this hypothesis is posed, not explored. We might not be able to place Luther on a psychiatrist's couch, but Waibel could have examined why Luther went overboard against peasants in revolt and Jews all the while, during the last two decades of his life, he was able to write dozens of treatises so rationally. Marius and Oberman's theories on Luther's vitriol are presented, but Waibel is mostly embarrassed by this part of his great man's legacy. Luther, to me, was an ideologue and an extremist. After he found his "truth," he allowed for neither other truths nor compromise. Luther also had a bad temper, which, along with his fear that the Last Days had begun, intensified his anger

and fear. Room should have been made to explore these areas, as they contributed to his mental state.

I also have issues with the book's organization and the absence of much of Luther's actual life. But there is little doubt that Luther saw the world as refracted through the prism of his faith. He lived during a revolutionary time, a time of transition from the medieval to the modern world. The strength of this brief life is its focus on Luther's views on aspects of Christianity; its weakness is the narrowness of his approach. My advice: Don't discard your weathered copy of Bainton's classic biography.

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Robert Mallett. *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003. Pp. ix; 266. Cloth, \$75.00; ISBN 0-333-74814-X. Paper, \$24.95; ISBN 0-333-74815-8.

Taking advantage of newly-released archival materials Robert Mallet has entered the debate on the role played by Fascist Italy in the background to the Second World War. The results confirm *Il Duce's* aggressive policies and challenge recent Italian scholarship, particularly that of Renzo De Felice, that denies Mussolini's expansionist goals. Resenting Italy's secondary imperial status, Mussolini's fascist *imperium* was ideologically distinct from previous Italian leaders, recalling the glories of the Roman empire. Mallett insists that such a policy meant war against Britain and France to secure key strategic points in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Such a policy was not possible without substantial rearmament and compatible allies. Prior to 1935, such an ally was not to be found.

Admired by many for crushing Bolshevism and finally securing a concordat with the Roman Church, Mussolini even prepared to fight Hitler over the question of Austrian independence. Having promised his people international greatness, however, Mussolini abandoned Austria in favor of imperial conquest in Africa. Italy's assault on Ethiopia set in motion a series of events that contributed greatly to the outbreak of the Second World War. The League of Nations began its slow collapse, and Italy moved closer ideologically to Nazi Germany. The Rome-Berlin Axis was difficult and unequal, and Hitler ordered the assault on Poland even before signing the Pact of Steel, but Mussolini was a victim of his own doctrine. Italian fascism viewed war as the means to ennoble great nations. Given Italy's military and economic weakness, such a policy required an ally. The only ally that supported such a world view was Nazi Germany. Despite the many problems, Mussolini remained faithful to this relationship, as he believed that such a partnership was the only means to secure his greater fascist empire.