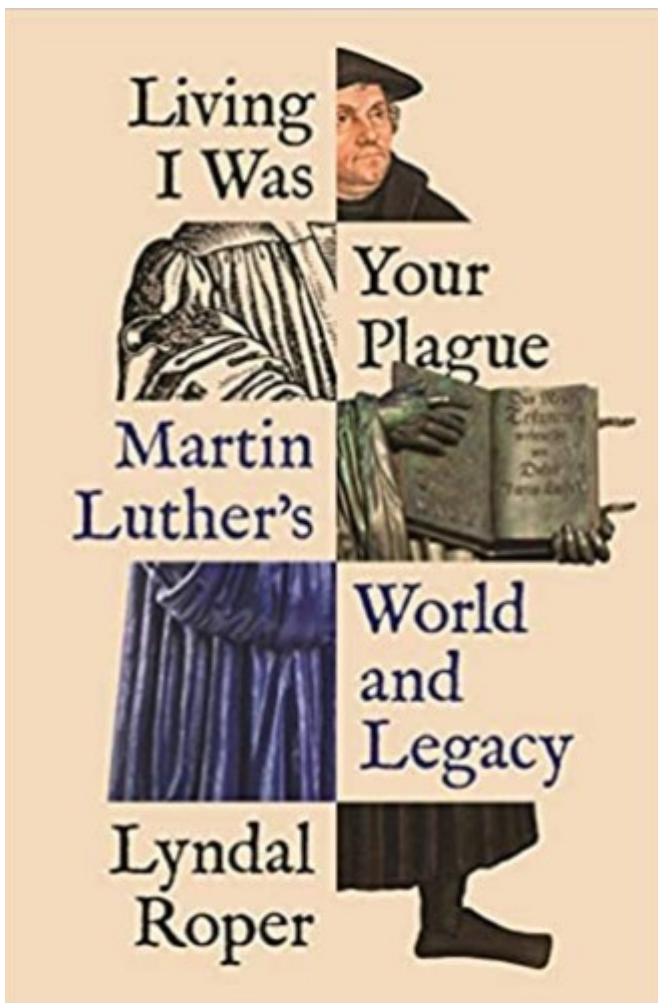


The (toxic) masculinity of Martin Luther

Some readers will find Lyndal Roper's new book unsettling. That might be a good thing.

by [Vincent Evener](#) in the [May 19, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Living I Was Your Plague

Martin Luther's World and Legacy

by Lyndal Roper
Princeton University Press
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The concept of toxic masculinity has gained cultural currency in recent years. Lyndal Roper's new book explores Martin Luther's masculinity as a sometimes toxic force that shaped his theology, life, and legacy. I say "sometimes toxic" because, for Roper, Luther's masculinity was also a creative force integral to his personality and the concrete success of the Reformation.

For readers who have a debt to Luther's thought and actions—for Lutherans especially—Roper's book will be an unsettling read. But like the law in Luther's theology, it may unsettle in ways that open diligent readers to new vision. The book accomplishes something that few of the books about Luther occasioned by the 2017 anniversary accomplished: it sees Luther with fresh eyes and shows us why we need to wrestle with his legacy.

Roper penned a sweeping Luther biography published in 2016, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*. Though it was unique in some of its thematic foci and its use of the methods of psychohistory (for which Roper is well known), that book told Luther's story largely through the series of significant events in his life that have punctuated accounts since the 16th century. For this new book, Roper says, she "needed to confront the less comfortable sides of his legacy. Most of all, I needed to look more critically at one of the aspects I loved most about Luther: his rambunctious masculine posturing."

Living I Was Your Plague approaches the reformer's masculinity from diverse angles. It examines artist Lucas Cranach the Elder's distinctly masculine depiction of Luther, the interpretation of dreams by Luther and his circle, Luther's hyperaggressive attacks on political authorities, his naming of himself and his opponents (and how this naming connected to the binaries in his theology), his hatred of the papacy as expressed in the slogan "Living I was your plague, O Pope, dead, I will be your death," the embeddedness of that hatred in subsequent Lutheran culture and piety, Luther the antisemite, and the way that hopes for expressing German identity or achieving Lutheran renewal via the "Luther decade" fizzled out amid a sea of Luther kitsch in 2017.

Noteworthy throughout is that Roper attends not simply to Luther but to the contemporaries and successors who shaped his legacy. Cranach and his workshop created the masculine image of Luther that remains familiar, but the now-beloved double portrait of Luther with his wife, Katherine, was a short-term production that found limited reception in the Reformation. It was also Cranach who, upon Luther's commission in 1545, produced an obscene series of anti-papal images, which featured excrement, farts, genitals, the pope with a vagina, a demon giving birth to monks from its anus, and an array of antisemitic motifs. (Roper's book is richly but not always pleasantly illustrated.) These images continued to be republished into the 17th century—an "iconography of hatred unaltered," Roper says, and proof of the corporeality and aggressive masculinity that shaped the tradition.

Roper analyzes Luther's antisemitism, seeking both its intellectual and irrational underpinnings. Her conclusions are in line with the best recent research (e.g., by Thomas Kaufmann) as she describes Luther's hostility to rabbis and his ever-increasing urgency—beginning in the 1530s—to identify the Lutheran church as "the true Chosen People" and "himself as a prophet," indeed the true Elijah. Roper also employs psychoanalysis here: whereas medieval antisemitism, frequently associated with the supposed defense of the Virgin Mary, may be interpreted as a projection of hostility toward the mother onto others, Luther's antisemitism reflects fears of castration "connected with the Oedipal stage."

According to Roper, Luther's antisemitism was "animated by a deep recognition and identification" of Luther with the rabbis and the Jews; he wanted to ingest them and then "void them from [his] body." Roper's attention to legacy is again illuminating here. She traces the genealogy of the 2015 Playmobil Luther—which included antisemitic text and was subsequently reissued—from the 1534 Luther Bible through the iconic 19th-century Luther statue in Wittenberg and Ottmar Hörl's plastic gnome Luthers, which were installed in the Wittenberg statue's temporary absence in 2010.

Roper employs psychological analysis while rejecting the reduction of Luther's complex personality to a single psychological factor, and she sets Luther clearly in his contexts, including historical conceptions of masculinity. The most significant gift of this book is how Roper uncovers the ghost of Luther occupying our present landscapes: where the figure of Luther has long been a locus for the negotiation of German cultural and political identity, where the ideals of masculinity championed by Luther's Reformation remain vibrant if not unchallenged, where the hatred of

Jews that Luther embraced continues to rear its ugly head, and where the Lutheran church in Luther's land and in North America may wonder if it soon will be a ghost.

Since this is not a boring book, few readers will agree with every argument. The psychoanalytic analyses will not convince people who are skeptical about psychoanalysis. I appreciated Roper's concluding take on the disappointment of expectations for 2017:

The fact that it was not possible to rekindle a sense of national identity around Luther is itself a major achievement: where Luther has been yoked to national goals . . . the result has been nationalistic in the worst ways. In 2017 the Luther celebrations did not answer the question of what German culture is or what a German identity might mean in a country welcoming thousands of migrants, and neither did they become the forum for such a discussion. But this is perhaps just as it should be.

Roper does less to analyze the disappointment of hopes for church renewal, but it may be that this disappointment likewise proves a blessing at second glance. Rather than ride a temporary wave of new enthusiasm, Lutherans must focus on the questions that really matter. Can Luther's life and thought bear meaning for the faithful in new ages and contexts? Can Lutheranism embrace a cloud of witnesses, historical and present, who represent the global life of the church, instead of treating all subsequent witnesses as footnotes to Luther?