

The real Luther: The Reformer in film

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 1, 2003](#) issue

Having just written a biography of Martin Luther, coming out in January in the Viking Penguin Lives series, I was curious to see how the movie *Luther* turned out. I liked it very much, though in the interest of full disclosure, I must state that my name does appear among the script consultants.

A central problem for the movie-makers and for this and other Luther biographers is how to present this late-medieval figure to postmodern readers and audiences. Trying to make him into a modern man would be a bad fit. Dealing with him in an antiquarian fashion would make the reader or viewer do all the work of adjusting to his world. Further, how does one deal with the contradictions of a person who embodied and savored paradox? The film does a good job of dealing with these challenges.

Whatever their verdict, some of the film's reviewers were simply ignorant, while others could not imagine themselves into the past. One faulted Joseph Fiennes for not being fat, as the critic thought Luther was. But contemporary sources spoke of him as a "gaunt" monk whose ribs showed, though later Katherine von Bora helped fatten him up. The reviewers in the papers that hit our porch on September 26 made some judgments at odds with the sources. The usually astute Roger Ebert (*Chicago Sun-Times*) doubted that Luther was "much like the uncertain, tremulous figure in *Luther*." If Ebert read the record, he would find in Luther uncertainty personified, tremulousness embodied, depression beyond words. We have Luther's accounts of all this, along with testimony by his patient confessor and impatient friends. Ebert was cute but not fully accurate in terming Luther a Ralph Nader who found the church "unsafe at any speed." Luther saw the church, however corrupt, as an agent of the gospel, so long as it baptized, forgave sins and communed believers.

Ebert presents Luther as "one of those wise guys you find in every class, who knows more than the teacher." His illustration: "When one hapless cleric is preaching 'there is no salvation outside the Church,'" meaning the Roman Catholic Church, Luther asks, "What of the Greek Christians?" That, however, was not the claim of "one

hapless cleric” but of the whole church leadership. And Luther was not being a wise guy in the classroom but a hunted person fighting for his life, coming up with a telling point to help save himself.

Ebert wanted an inspiring figure—as Luther could be—but in the film got a figure “weak, neurotic, filled with self-doubt,” and “an apologetic outsider with low self-esteem.” Don’t blame Fiennes. He was drawing on hundreds of pages of contemporary observations of the young Luther.

Ellen Fox in the *Chicago Tribune* said that Fiennes plays Luther as “a mouse-like, tormented monk,” which Luther indeed was in the early stages. Later, he became a mouse that roared and often a tormentor of others. Fox also thought that “there’s barely any God” in the film. Wrong. “God” comes in explicitly whenever Luther affirms Christ. Revisit the film and think: the Loving God=Christ, Christ=the Loving God. God is there aplenty, just not in the way modern vendors of a palsy deity present God. For the years the film covers, its portrait of Luther is accurate. Check it out.