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Martin Luther.*

BY W. GUY JOHNSON.

IN the earlier half of last year a book appeared with the title "Martin Luther, Hitler's Spiritual Ancestor", by Mr. Peter F. Wiener, which came as a surprise and shock to admirers of Luther who happened to read it. It represented Luther as a profligate, a drunkard, an enemy of democracy and of true Christianity, and also as having many other qualities equally undesirable. There is nothing new in all this. Luther was constantly assailed in his lifetime, and his memory has been defamed by innumerable enemies ever since his death; though so comprehensive an indictment within so small a compass can hardly have appeared in all that period. In order to appreciate Luther and the great work that he did for the reformation of religion in the sixteenth century, it is not necessary that we should obscure or deny his faults, though we ought to be on our guard against the tendency to judge earlier ages by the ideals and standards of modern and easier days. Luther's language was often violent and ill-judged, sometimes we may think inexcusably so. His conduct in the matter of the bigamy of Philip of Hesse, it is impossible to defend. He was harsh and intolerant in his attitude to the leaders of the Peasant Revolt. These and other faults, far from being unknown or ignored in England, as Mr. Wiener seems to suppose, have been admitted and deplored by everyone who has had any knowledge of Luther at all. But these blemishes are not the whole of Luther, nor are they any important part of him. Those who assert the contrary are either the victims of prejudice or lack any true understanding of history.

Mr. Wiener, however, professes to rest his case entirely on Luther's own speeches or writings. It is obvious, therefore, if his picture is a true representation, that a host of scholars, historians and divines have completely misunderstood and misinterpreted him throughout the past four centuries, which is a fairly large assumption; or, on the other hand, if it is a mere caricature, that some reply is urgently needed, for Mr. Wiener writes very plausibly and the great show of extracts purporting to be taken from what Luther actually said or wrote has a quite convincing appearance. Mr. Gordon Rupp has given us just the reply that was needed. With a wider and more thorough knowledge of the subject than Mr. Wiener manifestly possesses, Mr. Rupp takes up his quotations and misquotations and exhibits their worthlessness. Indeed, as the reviewer in "The Spectator" said, the reader gets tired of Mr. Wiener long before Mr. Rupp has done with him.

When Mr. Wiener's book was first published, the observant reader could, even without the author's admissions, see its completely one-sided and therefore unfair character. All that could present Luther in a bad light was raked together from every available quarter; anything

* *Martin Luther, Hitler's Cause or Cure?* by the Rev. E. Gordon Rupp, M.A., B.D. *Martin Luther, Hitler's Spiritual Ancestor*, by Peter F. Wiener. *Luther's Primary Works*, Wace and Buckheim. *History of Reformation in Germany*, T. M. Lindsay.

favourable was carefully excluded : and even of those which were unfavourable, many were obviously capable of a quite different meaning than that which Mr. Wiener intended that we should draw from them. But this critic of the Reformer had safeguarded himself beforehand against objections on this score. He wrote, " I shall not try to give a full and scholarly analysis of German Protestantism, of Luther and Lutheranism. I shall merely give my own reading of Luther ; I shall show only that side of Luther and his influence which is usually ignored in England and which is entirely the reverse of the traditional view." (p.9) And later (p.21), " I do not propose to enter into any discussion of Luther's doctrine, of his explanations of and views about the Scriptures." After that, it seems useless to object that the portrait is one-sided for the author could reply : " Of course it is, didn't I say at the outset that it would be ? " ; or to point to passages which could only be properly interpreted in the light of Luther's doctrinal views, since he could again reply, " It may be so, but I said plainly in my book that I did not propose to discuss Luther's doctrine."

Among the passages on which Mr. Wiener bases what he calls " my own reading of Luther ", is one which we will not repeat as it stands in his book, for it represents Luther as saying that our Lord was guilty of immoral relations with the woman of Samaria, with the woman taken in adultery and with Mary Magdalene. The passage is cited from the " Table Talk " which consists of Luther's familiar conversation written down at the time or afterwards by disciples or admirers who chanced to be with him. Though the " Table Talk " has a distinct value, it is obviously an unsafe source for what Luther actually said, as it is easy for words to get forgotten, especially if not written down at the moment of utterance, and it cannot by itself be taken as proof of a case ; and, moreover, we must not forget that this collection of sayings was not published until twenty years after Luther's death. It may confirm or illustrate Luther's own published works, but where there is contradiction or ambiguity what Luther wrote and published, and not what he is reported to have said, must determine the matter. The passage just mentioned is a case in point. In his Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians, with reference to the thirteenth verse of chapter three, " Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us ", Luther writes, " For he saith not that Christ was made a curse for Himself, but for us. Therefore all the weight of the matter standeth in this word " for us ". *For Christ is innocent concerning His own person*, and therefore He ought not to have been hanged upon a tree " ; and a few sentences further on he adds " For He being made a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world is not now an innocent person and without sins, is not now the Son of God born of the Virgin Mary, but a sinner which hath and carrieth the sin of Paul who was a blasphemer, an oppressor and a persecutor ; of Peter which denied Christ ; of David which was an adulterer and a murderer and caused the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of the Lord ; and, briefly, which hath and beareth all the sins of all men in His body ; *not that He himself committed them*, but for that He received them, being committed or done of us, and laid them upon His own body." Truly, if Mr. Wiener desires to retain his own reading of Luther, he is wise to avoid the discussion of Luther's doctrinal teaching. He appears,

moreover, to have restricted his studies even of the "Table Talk," or he might have seen in it the following:—"Therefore the law which Moses gave to be executed upon malefactors and murderers in general took hold on Christ, finding Him with and among sinners and murderers, *though in His own person innocent*"; or again, "*Our everlasting High Priest is holy, innocent, unstained and separate from sin*"; therefore it was needless for Him to wash His feet, but He washed and cleansed us, through His blood, from all our sins." ("Table talk," trs. William Hazlitt, London, 1848.) We have discussed this particular point at some length, as Mr. Rupp does not include the foregoing among his quotations in a forcible letter which appeared in *The Spectator* of 28th December last, and as much controversial capital has been made out of the passage in question in certain Roman Catholic quarters, since Mr. Wiener's book was published.

The truth is that in this country, notwithstanding the great work which he did for the Reformation, Luther is in more danger of being forgotten than of being over-esteemed. There are more reasons than one for this. The average man in these days has little acquaintance with history, and is apt to be deaf to the recitals of past heroisms of which he has barely heard. Then, again, the Reformers and the Reformation have for nearly a century been attacked and disparaged by the advocates of a resuscitated Romanism in our midst. And also the taunt, "made in Germany," has not been without its influence, especially since the first World war opened in 1914. But the words of Macaulay still remain true:—"A people which takes no pride in the noble achievements of remote ancestors, will never achieve anything worthy to be remembered with pride by remote descendants."

It is not too much to say that Luther was the greatest man of his age, even while we admit that he was no more free from faults than any of his contemporaries, or than we, with our vastly wider range of knowledge, can claim to be. We have our treasure still in earthen vessels, and are in no very good position to pass judgment on others who have been similarly placed. Edward Armstrong, in the preface to his great book, the *Life of the Emperor Charles V.*, wrote with reference to the impression which Luther's appearances in the book, taken alone, might produce: "The nobler, the softer, the more intellectual sides of the reformer's nature have but the most indirect bearing on my subject. If the far-famed scene at Worms be excepted, Luther is usually seen at his very worst when brought into contact with the more marked political events of Charles's reign. We see nothing of his cheerful family life, hear nothing of his virile eloquence, read nothing of his loving care for the education of the young. But there are ample opportunities for his violence, his coarse utterance, his obstinacy, his inconsistency. His conduct towards the deluded peasants, his acquiescence in Philip of Hesse's bigamy, his alternate rejection and acceptance of authority or of foreign alliances, his very scolding of Zwingli, or Bucer, or Melancthon, are unfortunately the episodes on which it may be necessary to touch, if not to dwell. Yet these disagreeables are no more the whole of Luther than are March winds and dust the whole of spring." (*Pref. xiv.*)

But when we turn to the real Luther, to the man he essentially was and the work he accomplished, these defects are but as dust in the

balances by comparison. Probably the first thing that arrests our attention is his indomitable courage. Alone, without prestige or position to support him, he faced the enmity of the ruling powers in the Church and the State, and he won through. Next we may note the depth and reality of his spiritual experience. He gave himself no rest until he could find peace with God, and this came at last by his diligent study of the scriptures. When he once had grasped the truth implicit in the words, "The just shall live by faith," and realised that God was not an angry Judge, but a gracious and loving Father, and that the sinner is saved by His free grace alone through faith in Christ's atoning work, the certainty and tenacity of his hold upon it were never shaken. By the preaching of this doctrine he liberated men from the oppressive weight of fear which had rested on them throughout the middle ages as a result of the current teaching of the Church. Again, his teaching with regard to the supreme authority of Scripture as the Word of God, and his translation of it into the language of the people, placed an inestimable treasure in their hands and ensured that the days of ignorance should not return. We may well marvel, too, at his prodigious literary industry at a time when the care of the Churches was taxing his health and strength to the uttermost; and in all this, to which much more might be added, we may find ample justification for the words of Principal T. M. Lindsay, "Hence it is that we may say without exaggeration that the Reformation was embodied in Martin Luther, that it lived in him as in no one else, and that its inner religious history may be best studied in the record of his spiritual experiences and in the growth of his religious convictions" (Hist. Ref. I. p. 193).

For the defence of Luther against his latest detractor, the reader may be left in the capable hands of Mr. Rupp, whose reply speaks for itself. It is fair, candid and convincing, and no point of importance is omitted. It is a book to buy, to read and to keep for reference. It should have a large circulation.