

10-1-2008

Fortuita Misericordia: Martin Luther on the Salvation of Biblical Outsiders

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In the preface to the first of his two volumes examining the "old Lutheran" exegesis of Gen 3:15, Father Tibor Gallus, S.J., offered an admiring ecumenical reflection on Martin Luther's regrettable lapse from the Catholic Church. If Luther had only been trained in the *philosophia perennis* of Saint Thomas, Gallus lamented, then he might well have become a great champion of the Catholic faith, the Augustine of the sixteenth century. Sadly, Gallus continued, Luther followed the flawed traditions of late medieval nominalism and so became the Origen of his day.¹ Gallus's comparison, misguided though it may have been, reflected a critical admiration for Martin Luther on the part of Catholic theologians that became commonplace in the latter twentieth century, largely as a result of the ecumenically friendly approach to Luther developed by the German Catholic scholar Joseph Lortz and his many students.² In the years since

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1. See Gallus, "Der Nachkomme der Frau" (Gen 3, 15) in der Altlutheranischen Schriftauslegung (Klagenfurt: Carinthia, 1964): "Dasselbe können wir, mutatis mutandis, über den 'Origenes des 16. Jahrhunderts', über Martin Luther, sagen. Wäre ihm statt der nominalistischen Geistesschulung jene der 'philosophia perennis' des hl. Thomas von Aquin zuteil geworden, so wäre wahrscheinlich manches in seinem Leben anders gekommen, und wir könnten in ihm den 'Augustin des 16. Jahrhunderts' sehen."

2. Lortz's own work is summarized in his *The Reformation in Germany*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald Walls (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1968). For a brief introduction, see his "Why Did the Reformation Happen?" in *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1972), 119-38. To mention only three of the many important studies inspired by Lortz: Jared Wicks, *Man Yearning for Grace: Luther's Early Spiritual Teaching* (Washington, DC: Corpus Books, 1968); Harry McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1969); Denis Janz, *Luther and Late Medieval Thomism* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1983).

Father Gallus wrote, moreover, Catholic scholars have continued to break through to new and better understandings of Luther's theology. As a result of the industry of theologians such as Otto Hermann Pesch, Peter Manns, Harry McSorley, C.S.P., Erwin Iserloh, Jared Wicks, S.J., and many others, Catholic scholars today rightly see Luther as much closer to Thomas Aquinas than to Origen. Moreover, the deep continuities and resonances they have identified between the Reformer and the Angelic Doctor have been put to good use in the ecumenical dialogues, where, at least in the matter of justification, Catholics and Lutherans have together identified an agreement in "basic truths" not only between Luther and Aquinas, but between the traditions the two men represent as well.³ On that basis, the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church agreed in 1999 in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ) that the remaining differences in their respective understandings of justification are no longer "church dividing."⁴

In the present essay, I want to continue in the tradition of scholarship that has helped make progress possible in the Lutheran-Catholic ecumenical dialogues by exploring a problem in Luther's biblical exegesis that suggests some of the further contributions he could make to theology and exegesis today, for Catholics as well as Protestants. Specifically, I want to try to make sense of an exegetical curiosity that appears in the elder Luther's exposition of Genesis, that is to say, *fortuita misericordia*, or, as the American edition typically translates it, "accidental mercy." Understanding what Luther meant by "accidental mercy" will enable us to see how he answered a question that will again bring Origen to mind: may or ought the Christian to hope for the salvation of "outsiders" to the Christian faith? It was widely agreed in Luther's day that his great Alexandrian

3. Pesch's great work is *Die Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und bei Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1967). For a précis of sorts, see Pesch's "Existential and Sapiential Theology: The Theological Confrontation between Luther and Thomas Aquinas," in *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), 61–81, 182–93. For a brief account of Catholic Luther scholarship that emphasizes the significance of Pesch's work, see Jos Vercruysse, "Katholische Lutherforschung im 20. Jahrhundert," in *Lutherforschung im 20. Jahrhundert: Rückblick, Bilanz, Ausblick*, ed. Rainer Vinke (Mainz: Verlag Phillip von Zabern, 2004), 191–212. For a more recent work that suggests the continuing vitality of Catholic Luther research, see Hubertus Blaumeiser's *Martin Luthers Kreuzestheologie: Schlüssel zu seiner Deutung von Mensch und Wirklichkeit* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1995).

4. The notion of an agreement in "basic truths" was employed extensively in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ), formally accepted by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church at Augsburg in 1999. For the text of the *Declaration*, with a commentary from the Lutheran side, see the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: A Commentary by the Institute for Ecumenical Research*, Strasbourg (Hong Kong/Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1997). For a thoughtful Catholic reflection on the JDDJ, see Hans L. Martensen, "The Joint Declaration on Justification: A Nordic Catholic Perspective," *Ecumenical Review* 52 (April 2000): 204–10. Bishop Martensen was Catholic cochair of the Joint Evangelical Lutheran–Roman Catholic Commission from 1973 to 1984.

predecessor had gotten himself into trouble—and seemed to have earned the condemnation of the fifth ecumenical council—when he had articulated a vision of universal salvation, a “restoration of all things to God” (*apokatastasis theou*) in which every fallen creature would be saved, including the devil.⁵ More recently, the discussion of the question of universal salvation was renewed and deepened in Catholic theology in the conversation surrounding the publication of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”*?⁶

As Cardinal Avery Dulles has observed, few theologians in Catholic tradition were as hopeful as Origen, or even as von Balthasar.⁷ Indeed, most were conspicuously unhopeful regarding the eternal destiny of the great majority of humankind, particularly those who lived and died entirely outside the church. For his part, Martin Luther had about as dark a vision of the condition of fallen humankind as any premodern Western theologian.⁸ He sharply criticized those he thought overestimated the salvific potency of fallen human nature—“Oh you fools, you pig-

5. See his *On First Principles*, bk. III, ch. 6. For a brief theological evaluation of Origen’s position, see Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 215–18. Ratzinger lists Gregory of Nyssa, Didymus of Alexandria, Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Evagrius Ponticus as theologians who followed Origen’s lead in retaining a hope for universal salvation. His conclusion in this matter seems prescient, especially for the case of Martin Luther: “But the mainstream tradition of the Church has flowed along a different path. It found itself obliged to concede that such an expectation of universal salvation derived from the system rather than from the biblical witness. The dying echo of Origen’s ideas has lingered through the centuries, however, in the many variants of the so-called doctrine of *misericordia*” (216).

6. Full title, *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”?: With a Short Discourse on Hell*, trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1988). The debate on this problem has been taken up again in Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), esp. ch. 9.

7. See his “The Population of Hell,” *First Things*, no. 133 (May 2003): 36–41. For hell in the history of Christian thought, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), 479–85; J. Gnllka, “Hölle,” *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 10, ed. J. Hofer and K. Rahner, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder & Herder, 1957–1965), 445–50; E. G. Hardwick, “Hell,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 724–28.

8. Richard Marius has argued recently that Luther feared not the fires of hell, but the annihilation of the soul after death. See his *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Marius’s argument, however, is tendentious almost to the point of special pleading. Luther was not interested in offering a detailed account of hell, but he affirmed its reality often enough. Paul Althaus concludes: “With the New Testament, Luther teaches the resurrection of all the dead and not only of the believers. All enter into judgment. The believers enter into eternal life with Christ; evil men enter into eternal death with the devil and his angels. Luther expressly rejects the idea that the devil will finally also be saved.” *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 417. For a brief sampling of Luther’s thoughts on hell, see Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 624–28.

theologians!"⁹—particularly as it was expressed in the classical late medieval formula of Gabriel Biel: "To those who do what is in them [i.e., who exercise their natural capacity to love God for God's own sake], God does not deny grace."¹⁰ In the memorable words of the "Disputation against Scholastic Theology" (1517), he offered a grim assessment of the fallen human being in rebellion against God: "Man is *by nature* unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he himself wants to be God, and does not want God to be God."¹¹ Pushing his Augustinianism to an extreme, Luther could even go so far as to assert that in fallen humankind the *imago Dei* had been replaced by the *imago diaboli*.¹² Thoroughly fallen, the sinner in Luther's understanding has not the slightest hope for salvation apart from God's gracious intervention. Moreover, on at least one occasion Luther directly answered the question of the necessity of faith for salvation. In a 1522 letter to Hans von Rechenberg, he admitted that the notion that God eternally damns some but saves others is offensive to human reason. He insisted nevertheless that mature Christians should be prepared to surrender to the teaching of Scripture, and cited a number of Scripture texts—Mk 16:16, Heb 11:6, Jn 3:5, 18—to prove his assertion that "God cannot and will not save anyone without faith." The logic of Luther's claim was simple: God "cannot" save apart from faith because God, who cannot lie, has clearly announced that no one will be saved without faith.¹³

9. References to Luther's writings are to the standard editions of his works: *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–); English translations are taken from *Luther's Works: American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–). Hereafter, these are cited as WA and LW, respectively. Volume and page numbers are separated by a period. The reference here is to WA 56.274. English translation in *Luther: Lectures on Romans*, trans. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 129.

10. The classic Latin phrase is "*facientibus quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam*." Luther knew this theology well through his study of Gabriel Biel's *Canonis misse expositio*. In *Tischreden* 3722 reported by Anton Lauterbach in 1538, Luther mentions his close reading of Biel. See *Luthers Werke in Auswahl*, vol. 8, *Tischreden*, ed. Otto Clemen, 2nd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1950), 149–50. For Biel's theology, see Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

11. Emphasis mine. The reference here is to thesis 17. LW 31.10; WA 1.225: "*Non potest homo naturaliter velle deum esse deum, Immo vellet se esse deum et deum non esse deum*." Of course, the use of the term *naturaliter* refers to the human being in a state of "fallen nature." Cf. Philip Watson's classic work, *Let God Be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1950).

12. N.b., however, that the Lutheran tradition itself received with caution Luther's hyperbolic descriptions of the condition of fallen humankind, rejecting, for example, the assertion of Matthias Flacius Illyricus that the very substance of the fallen human being is sin. For an introduction to this complex debate and its history, see Jörg Baur, "Flacius—Radikale Theologie," in *Matthias Flacius Illyricus 1575–1975* (Regensburg: Lassleben, 1975). For the many senses of the term "Augustinian" in the later Middle Ages and in Luther, see David C. Steinmetz, "Luther and the Late Medieval Augustinians: Another Look," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 44 (1973): 245–60.

13. The letter may be found in LW 43.47–55; WA 10.II.322–26.

Thus, it is surprising to find that in his biblical exegesis the elder Luther frequently offered remarkably hopeful assessments of the prospects for salvation of persons, or even of whole nations, that the biblical narrative would seem to have left on the outside looking in. Indeed, in the *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545) with which he brought his academic career to a close, Luther spoke frequently about the fate of the less heroic figures in the patriarchal histories, and he gladly included many of them in his vision of heavenly glory.¹⁴ When he tried to explain how their salvation was possible, he often referred to the “accidental mercy” mentioned above.

What did he mean? So far as I have been able to find, this unusual locution is not a patristic or medieval commonplace. Instead, it is unique to Luther and his *Genesis Lectures*. In the vast body of research on Luther, however, the phrase has yet to be subjected to critical scrutiny, so there is no settled scholarly opinion about its meaning.¹⁵ Moreover, the concept seems to sit uncomfortably between Luther’s robustly Augustinian anthropology and his unshakable confidence in the reliability of God’s promise to save. Indeed, it sounds more than a little bit peculiar for him to speak either of God’s offering or of the sinner’s reception of divine mercy as in any way “accidental.” In Luther’s theology, the sure word of the divine promise heard in the gospel rests on God’s election and grace as revealed in Christ. This self-same promise is grasped by divinely given faith. What aspect of the divine mercy could Luther have considered accidental? What hope did he hold out for those who lived outside the visible boundaries of the true church?¹⁶

14. For an analysis, e.g., of Luther’s hopeful exegesis of the stories of Hagar and Lot’s wife, in which he asserts the salvation of both these women and their descendants, see Mickey Leland Mattox, “*Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs*”: Martin Luther’s Interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the *Enarrationes in Genesin*, 1535–1545 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 152–70, 179–82.

15. None of the studies of Luther’s thought I have consulted provides a systematic exposition of this concept, perhaps because of the chilling effect of Peter Meinhold’s *Die Genesisvorlesung und ihre Herausgeber* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936). Meinhold argued that the *Lectures* were unreliable as a source for the elder Luther’s theology, allegedly because Luther’s students, who edited the *Lectures* for publication, had shaped them to fit with the theology they had learned from Luther’s colleague, Philip Melancthon. More recent studies have suggested a rather more nuanced picture, accepting the clear evidence that Luther’s students augmented his work in significant ways, but at the same time recognizing that the *Lectures* mediated Luther as he wished to be heard. The present essay should be understood in part as a further contribution to this ongoing conversation. The scholarship on the *Lectures* is evaluated in Mattox, “*Defender*,” 263–73.

16. Luther’s most comprehensive statement on divine election may be found in his *De Seroo Arbitrio*, in WA 18.600–786. For the connections between God’s sovereign choosing and the certainty of the divine promise of salvation, one may consult, e.g., *Luther: Lectures on Romans*, esp. 246 ff. Original in WA 56.

This essay seeks to answer questions such as these by analyzing the origins and meaning of the concept of *fortuita misericordia*. To accomplish that goal, I examine first Luther's employment of the term *fortuita* in his 1531 exegesis of Galatians. Next, I trace his development of "accidental mercy" in the *Genesis Lectures* themselves. Finally, I offer an explanation of *fortuita misericordia* and attempt to discern its significance for our understanding of the theology of the elder Luther. Luther's hope for the biblical outsiders, it turns out, was anything but the exegetical expression of an otherwise baseless optimism. To the contrary, it was grounded deeply in his self-understanding and experience of grace, and it reflected central themes in his ecclesiology and his doctrine of God, particularly when he focused on the distinction between the "true church" and the "false."¹⁷ It also underscores old man Luther's continuing theological vigor, especially when we attend to the interplay between his bedrock theological convictions and his reading of the Old Testament.¹⁸ Luther has much to contribute to the emerging discipline of "theological exegesis," I believe, and his use of *fortuita misericordia* is an instructive case in point.¹⁹

BACKGROUND: THE ENARRATIONES ON GALATIANS, 1531

As noted above, the phrase *fortuita misericordia* was not common in patristic or medieval theology. Instead, it seems to have originated in

17. In a brief summary of the *Lectures on Genesis*, Martin Brecht observes: "Cain and Abel, later Esau and Jacob, were for Luther the representatives of the false and the true church, where it was the constant fate of the true church to be persecuted by the false. The lectures often picked up this distinction, a sign of how strongly Luther was concerned with the theme of the church at that time. . . . Peace between the two churches was impossible, and could not be achieved by religious negotiations." *Martin Luther*, vol. 3, *The Preservation of the Church 1532–1546*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 138.

18. Luther's hermeneutic has long been the subject of intense scholarly study. In recent years, however, research has turned increasingly toward comparative methods of analysis in order better to understand his actual practice of biblical exposition. See, e.g., Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1942; 3rd ed. [erweitert um ein Nachwort], Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1991); Ebeling, "The Beginning of Luther's Hermeneutic," *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993): 129–58, 315–38, 451–68; Leif Grane, *Modus Loquendi Theologicus: Luthers Kampf um die Erneuerung der Theologie (1515–1518)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959); James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002); Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as Seen in His "Commentaries" on Galatians*, 1519–38 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1993).

19. For a recent study that analyzes how theology shapes Luther's reading of Scripture, see Michael Parsons, *Luther and Calvin on Old Testament Narratives: Reformation Thought and*

Luther's classroom efforts to fill in the silences in the biblical text. The concept should be seen in the first place, then, as one of Luther's many contributions to the "exegetical lore" associated with the stories of Genesis.²⁰ Prior to the *Genesis Lectures*, Luther had used the term *fortuita* negatively. In a lecture on Ps 120 (121), for example, he offered a reflection on God's providential care. From a human perspective, things seem to happen by chance or accident (*fortuita*). However, *theologia* knows that God is an utterly reliable "guardian" (*custos*) who watches over us even as we sleep.²¹ Faith therefore recognizes instantly the falsehood inherent in the concept of a "fortuitous" event. Moreover, the mention of *fortuita* immediately brings to mind the pagan goddess *Fortuna*, dispenser of chance or luck, and this suggests quite rightly what sounds so very unlike Luther about the notion of "chance mercy." Given his belief in God's providence and his unshakable confidence in the sure promises of God, what place for a divine mercy received by accident?²²

Later, in his 1531 commentary on Galatians, Luther employed the term *fortuita* somewhat more constructively. Attempting to make sense of Paul's allegory of Sarah and Hagar in Gal 4, he turned to Gen 16 where the story of Sarah's decision to give Hagar to Abraham as a surrogate had been told. Finding herself barren, humble Sarah surmised that the promise had been given not to her and Abraham *together*, but to Abraham *alone*.²³ God, she concluded, had rejected her in favor of a surrogate.²⁴ Thus, Ishmael was born to Abraham *fortuito et casu*, that is, "by [Sarah's] accident and error." This presumed turn of events led Luther to examine the meaning of the Pauline distinction between sonship "according to the flesh" (*secundum carnem*) and "through the

Narrative Text (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2004). Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson make a spirited argument for the significance of premodern exegesis, including that of Luther, for contemporary interpretation in their contributions to *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, ed. Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 3–22, 335–45.

20. For the concept of "exegetical lore," see David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 73.

21. WA 40.III.67–68: "Secundum carnem deus est derelictor, sed secundum spiritum et promissionem suam est custos. . . . Ego doceo, lego, scribo, exerceo totius corporis officia et omnium sensuum actiones, dormio. Unde ista etc.? Mundus: fortuita. Theologia: nisi deus custodiret, quando dormio, tum omni momento amitterem oculum, corpus, vitam."

22. This impression is confirmed by a glance at Luther's comments on Ps 90:3, which in his version reads "thou causest men to die." In this case, the adverb *temere* is used rather than the noun *fortuitus*. "Men do not come into being by accident. They are not born by accident. They do not suffer by accident. They do not die by accident." In each case, "by accident" is *temere*. WA 40.III, 518; LW 13.96–97.

23. WA 40.I.2, 655b.

24. According to Luther, Sarah thought: "Deus non mendax, promisit marito semen; sed deus me reprobavit." WA 40.I.2, 655a and 655b.

promise" (*per promissionem*). Born physically as a direct result of the divine promise, Isaac alone was chosen as the ancestor and typological figure of Christ. Born physically as a result of Sarah's mistaken judgment, Ishmael was rejected and made the figure of all those who "are not the sons of God."²⁵ Nevertheless, Luther argues, when it comes to salvation, all who have faith are spiritually sons *per promissionem*. As Abraham's firstborn, he reckons, Ishmael quite naturally shared his father's faith; rejected according to the flesh, by faith he was ingrafted through the promise. Indeed, Isaac himself was not only physically the son of the promise but spiritually as well, again through faith in the promise. By their shared faith in the promise of God, elected Isaac and rejected Ishmael stand together as sons of God.

THE GENESIS LECTURES

In the *Lectures on Genesis* Luther began to use *fortuita* positively, pairing it as an adjective with *misericordia*, and using it to sort through a set of ecclesiological and soteriological questions similar to those considered in the Galatians commentary.²⁶ In the *Genesis Lectures*, questions of ecclesiology were, in effect, family matters. Beginning with Adam, Luther identified the patriarchal households as the locus of the faithful reception and proclamation of God's promise of a Savior, the so-called *protevangelium* first announced to Adam and Eve in Gen 3:15.²⁷ Beginning, then, with Adam, the patriarchal households became the historical bearers of that divine promise, communities of witness whose members proclaimed and taught the word of God. Handing down the promise of God and teaching their children faith in God's word, these households were for Luther the *ecclesia vera* of Old Testament times. Households outside the boundaries of the faith and traditions of the patriarchs, beginning with the household of Cain, belonged by definition to the *ecclesia falsa*.²⁸ As will become clear below, the concept of "accidental mercy" takes on a positive role in

25. WA 40.I.2, 656b. Luther pairs this symbolical reading of Isaac and Ishmael with a similar reading of Sarah and Hagar. Sarah, the mistress, figures the promise of the gospel while Hagar, the handmaid, figures the law. For more on Luther's readings of Sarah and Hagar, see Mattox, "Defender," chs. 3–4.

26. I base this assertion on a word search of the electronic edition of the WA.

27. For Luther's exegesis of Gen 3:15, see Mattox, "Defender," 58–62, 95–96.

28. In his *Supputatio annorum mundi* (1541), Luther mentions the "apostate Cain" prominently as the founder of the "church of the devil" (*ecclesia diaboli*), and he draws attention to the contest between "Cainite church" and the *ecclesia dei*. (WA 53.28–30). For an analysis of Luther's understanding of world history, see John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 106–61.

Luther's consideration of the salvation of the members of these outsider communities.

Before we consider Luther's exegetical employment of "accidental mercy," it will be helpful to review some aspects of Luther's ecclesiology, particularly his understanding of the distinction between the true church and the false. Luther's reference to "two churches" immediately brings to mind Augustine's "two cities," typified by the biblical figures of Cain and Abel.²⁹ Indeed, the employment of this motif marks Luther's ecclesiology as fundamentally Augustinian.³⁰ At first glance, it also suggests a rather neat division between the two churches in Luther's thought, heroes and heroines on one side, villains and villainesses on the other. But both the Augustinian character of Luther's understanding of the two churches and the seemingly neat division it suggests must be carefully qualified. As Headley explains, for Luther the fundamental divide between the "two cities" is delineated not, as it is for Augustine, by an abiding opposition between *caritas Dei* and *amor sui*, but by the distinction between faith and unbelief.³¹ Faith is central for Luther's understanding of the church because the word of God, which creates faith, stands at the church's center. The true church is hidden (*verborgen, absconditus*) precisely because it draws its life from a reality that lies beyond it.³² One must hasten to add, however, that the church in Luther's theology is emphatically visible, not at all the "Platonic republic" his detractors have so often alleged.³³ In both his "On the Councils and the Church" (1539) and "Against Hanswurst"

29. The locus classicus in Augustine is *De civitate dei*, XV.1: "Natus est igitur prior Cain ex illis duobus generis humani parentibus, pertinens ad hominum civitatem, posterior Abel, ad civitatem Dei." According to Headley, *Luther's View of Church History*, 64: "In their recognition of the Church's supra-temporal reality, whose origin was anterior to the Incarnation, the fathers generally recognized Adam rather than Abel as the beginning of the Church. It was Augustine who in his anti-Pelagian writings developed the figure of Abel in the West." On the medieval elaboration of this theme, see the introduction to Heiko Oberman's *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought Illustrated by Key Documents* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), esp. 19–26. Luther knew that the distinction between these two "churches" comes from Augustine. See his *Against Hanswurst*, WA 51.477; LW 41.193: "As long as there is no proof it is vain for one part to boast of being the church and call the other part heretics. One part must be false and untrue. For there are two kinds of churches stretching from the beginning of history to the end, which Augustine calls Cain and Abel."

30. Steinmetz, "Another Look," sees Luther's theology of grace as Augustinian in the sense that he embodies certain tendencies in Augustine but goes beyond Augustine's original teaching. Something similar is clearly the case in Luther's reception of the "two cities" idea.

31. *Luther's View of Church History*, 67–68.

32. *Luther's View of Church History*, 68.

33. Luther mentions the charge as early as 1521 in his replies to the "goat" Jerome Emser and Thomas Murner entitled, "Auf das überchristlich, übergeistlich und überkünstlich Buch Bocks Emser zu Leipzig Antwort. Darin auch Murnars seines Gesellen gedacht wird" (WA 7.683): "Da ich die Christliche kirch ein geystlich vorsamlung genennet het, spottistu meyn, als wolt ich ein kirch bawen wie Plato ein statt, die nyndert were, Und lest dyr deyn zufall

(1541), Luther identified a number of visible, external marks by means of which the church could be identified.³⁴ His lists of these marks varied somewhat (seven in the former treatise, ten or perhaps eleven in the latter), but in each case the crucial ones are God's word and the holy sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, to which may be added the keys, ordination, the Our Father, cross and suffering, and so on.³⁵

These ecclesiological convictions help us to understand why in Luther's case the distinction between the true and false church yields not the stark contrast of black on white, but changing shades of gray. Indeed, in a penetrating analysis of Luther's ecclesiology, especially as found in the *Lectures on Genesis*, Trigg has shown that Luther uses the two-churches motif in two different ways.³⁶ Most obviously, it denotes the distinction between the visible true church, which has the word and the sacraments, and the false church, which has not. This is the straightforward, common-sense meaning of the two-churches motif. But Luther also uses this motif to denote internal division within the visible true church itself, that is, the fact that within the church one finds both authentic faith and stubborn unbelief. The true visible church is internally divided, a *corpus permixtum*, within which the true and false churches invisibly coexist. At the same time, moreover, the word of God perpetually invites those in the visible *false* church to saving faith and, therefore, to proper membership in the visible *true* church. Thus, Trigg concludes, "Although the false and the true churches can be and are treated separately, a full understanding of the paradoxical element in Luther's ecclesiology requires that their essential inseparability be recognised also."³⁷ That recognition, what we might call the simultaneity of the true and the false churches in Luther's theol-

so hertzlich wol gefallen, als habstu es fast wol troffen. Sprichst: were das nit ein feyne statt, ßo geystlich maurenn, geystlich tuern, geystlich buechßen, geystlich roß unnd als geystlich were? Und ist deyn endtlich meynung, die Christlich kirch mug nit on leylich statt, rawm und guetter bestehen."

34. WA 50.488–653; WA 51.461–572. Both in LW 41.3–178 and 179–256.

35. For a brief analysis of Luther's ecclesiology, with attention to the true/false church distinction, see Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 277–85.

36. Jonathan D. Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Leiden: Brill, 1994). See especially ch. 6, "A Church with No Boundaries?" 174–203.

37. Trigg, *Baptism*, 191. One should resist the anachronistic temptation to read into Luther's remarks the clear "denominational" divisions that were concretized only long after his death. Of course, there is no shortage of evidence to suggest that Luther flatly identified the "false church" of Cain with the Church of Rome. In the *Genesis Lectures*, e.g., Luther can refer derisively to the Roman church as "the Cainite church of the pope" (WA 42.192; LW 1.260). Still, there is also good counter-evidence to show that Luther saw true Christianity even in the "pope's church." Frankly, it seems difficult to offer a consistent reconciliation of these opposing lines of evidence. No doubt, some of the difficulty would be resolved simply by giving appropriate attention to the context and the type of writing at hand. But difficulties would likely remain. Lohse concludes that Luther's "judgment on the Roman church

ogy, will prove indispensable for the attempt to make sense of his use of the concept of "accidental mercy."³⁸

Cain, His Wife, and the "Cainites" (Genesis 4)

In his comments on Gen 4:14, Luther reflected on the exile of Cain after the murder of Abel. Most importantly, Luther reckons, God commanded that Cain should not be killed (Gen 4:15). Cain retained the "twofold benefit" (*duplex beneficium*) of "life and posterity" (*vita et posteritas*). At the same time, he had lost both *regnum* and *ecclesia*, that is, he was no longer Adam's heir and was excluded from the family of faith to whom the Messiah had been promised.³⁹ Alienated from the Old Testament church, Cain and his descendants had no "certain promise" (*promissio certa*) of salvation.

Nevertheless, Luther confidently concluded that many among Cain's descendants must have been saved. Just as proselytes were later incorporated among the Jews, so also some of the Cainites were included in Adam's church. Indeed, for Luther not only the Cainites but also the later Ammonites and Moabites (notably, Ruth) were the beneficiaries of God's mercy. Searching for an appropriate way to express this happy result, Luther says, "if I may say it this way, [they received an] *accidental mercy* not assured beforehand by a promise."⁴⁰ To be sure, Luther holds out little if any hope for the salvation of Cain himself. Cain clearly seems destined for hell. The "twofold benefit" extended to him in Gen 4:15 was given not with Cain's own restoration in mind, but with a view toward the elect among his progeny (*propter electos*). In their number, Luther explicitly includes Namaan the king of Nineveh, Nebuchadnezzar, Evil-Merodach (the son and successor of Nebuchadnezzar), the pharaoh whom the patriarch Joseph served, and other unnamed Gentiles.⁴¹

Elsewhere, Luther clarifies his understanding of the divine mercy that saved this rather unlikely cast of characters. Crucially, *fortuita misericordia* is grounded in a peculiar species of divine promise. Unlike the promise of the Messiah, he says, this promise was "uncertain and accidental," an "indefinite mercy" that bore only the slightest resemblance to the sure mercy

as church is thus *ambivalent*; on the one hand, he conceded that it is altogether a church, that it lacks nothing that constitutes a church, but on the other asserted that it has become a church of the devil" (emphasis added). See his *Martin Luther's Theology*, 285.

38. For an analysis of Luther's ecclesiology in the context of his break with the papacy, see Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 126–30.

39. WA 42.222; LW 1.301.

40. Emphasis mine. WA 42.222: "Haec fuit, ut sic vocem, fortuita misericordia non certificata prius per promissionem." Cf. LW 1.302. Elsewhere, Luther uses the phrase "vaga misericordia" (WA 42.224; LW 1.304).

41. WA 42.222, 231; LW 1.302, 314.

revealed in the *promissio certa* given to Adam and Eve (the *protevan-gelium*).⁴² It was a mere *promissio legalis*, Luther explains, because it depended for its execution not on the infallible faithfulness of God, but on human obedience to a divine law. As with the moral law more generally, so also this law constrains human sin, preserves the lives of Cain and his posterity, and leaves open the possibility of salvation for the elect among them. Accidental mercy, then, is not a saving but rather a preserving grace, one given in the paradoxical form of a divine positive law, conditioned on human obedience.⁴³

In his analysis of the fate of the Cainites, Luther remarks frequently on the enmity between the "church of Adam" and the "church of Cain," that is, between the true church and the false. From the beginning, he says, there has been a twofold church (*duplex ecclesia*): "the children of Satan" and "the children of God."⁴⁴ The children of God suffered, but the children of Satan enjoyed worldly success. Indeed, by the time of Noah and the great flood, the church of Cain had triumphed completely, and the true church comprised only the eight persons who were saved in the ark. This pattern, Luther says, can be expected to continue in every age, for the true church is always marked by "cross and sorrow."⁴⁵ Although Luther elsewhere declines to identify neatly the church true and false, the implication and surely also the intention of these remarks (delivered before an audience of aspiring evangelical ministers!) is to identify the suffering church of the Wittenbergers as "true" and, conversely, the papal church as "false."

The concept of *fortuita misericordia* here also contributes directly to Luther's ecclesiological ruminations. Explaining the difference between the reliable mercy of the *promissio certa* and the accidental mercy given through the *promissio legalis*, he constructs a revealing analogy: "Similarly, under the papacy we obtained mercy only by accident, so to speak. No definite promise had been given in advance that in our lifetime the truth would be brought to light and that the Antichrist would be revealed."⁴⁶ The "accidental mercy" Luther now has in mind is the unexpected grace that has brought to light the truth of the gospel in his own day. In this

42. WA 42.225; LW 1.306.

43. WA 42.225; LW 1.306.

44. WA 42.229; LW 1.311–12.

45. WA 42.229; LW 1.312. Cf. WA 42.239; LW 1.325. Regarding the "accidental mercy," Luther remarks: "Moses does not mention who of Cain's descendants obtained it. It is his purpose to maintain a distinction between the two churches, the one being the righteous one, which has the promises of the future life but in this life is afflicted and poor, the other being the ungodly one, which prospers in this life and is rich."

46. WA 42.222: "Sicut nos sub Papatu fortuito, ut sic loquar, venimus ad misericordiam. Non enim praecessit certa promissio futurum, ut nobis viventibus patefiat veritas et manifestetur Antichristus." Cf. LW 1.301. Examining Luther's attitude toward the papacy, Scott Hendrix writes: "The pope was the Antichrist because his office was the agency through

case, however, "accidental mercy" refers not merely to the preservative effect of a divine positive law, but to the salvific impact of the word of God as, in God's own good time, it brings light where once there was only darkness.

With this in mind, it is instructive to listen in on Luther's attempts to answer the question of where Cain got his wife, known to tradition as Calmana.⁴⁷ For the first thirty years after their expulsion from the garden, Luther reckons, Adam and Eve were "very prolific," so there were sisters readily available for the young sons to take as wives.⁴⁸ Calmana is mentioned, however, only after Cain's crime and exile.⁴⁹ Cain married either before his crime, Luther figures, or afterward. If before, then Calmana would have followed him into exile in faithfulness to her marital obligation. Though guilty of no crime, she would rightly have suffered with her husband the pain of separation from parents and family.

But if Cain had married only afterward, then "the girl who married him must be lavishly praised." Why? Because she must have done so "in holy trust in God and out of obedience to her parents."⁵⁰ Calmana was a woman of faith and a member of the *ecclesia vera*, but she willingly resigned herself to association with Cain's *ecclesia falsa*. Thus, she became the means through which God later blessed the Cainites. The thought of such a selfless act puts Luther immediately in mind of Christ. Just as Christ came to the Gentiles only because of God's mercy, so also by means of this young woman's willingness to marry her murderous brother the *promissio legalis* given to Cain bore unexpected fruit in salvation of "some" of the Cainites.⁵¹

Calmana, in short, was a type of Christ. But perhaps even more importantly, her presence in Cain's household symbolized for Luther the presence of true faith within the false church. Thus, while the two churches are visibly divided, there is a second, less visible line of division that runs not

which the devil was attacking faith *from inside the church*. The purpose of rejecting the papacy, then, was not to start a new church or, for that matter, to split the old one, but to protect the faithful from the jurisdiction of that office through which, in Luther's eyes, the devil was most insidiously at work. In ecclesiastical terms, exclusion of papal jurisdiction from Saxony and other Protestant territories eventually meant different churches, but Luther did not equate the rejection of the papacy with the permanent establishment of a new church" (emphasis mine). See his "The Controversial Luther," *Word & World* 3 (1983): 391-97, here 394.

47. WA 42.230; LW 1.312. Luther cites from Lyra the Jewish legend that with each pregnancy Eve brought forth twins, a male and a female. Cain's wife, according to these legends, was his sister, Calmana.

48. WA 42.208: "Omnino enim credo primis triginta annis coniugium primorum Parentum fuisse foecundissimum." Cf. LW 1.282.

49. See Gen 4:17.

50. WA 42.230; LW 1.313.

51. WA 42.1: "Ita de posteritate Cain puto aliquos servatos, quanquam Cain promissionem de Semine benedicto penitus amisisset." Cf. LW 1.313-14.

between the churches but *through* them. On the one hand, the true church, to which the certain promise has been given, is located concretely in Adam's household, where the promise is proclaimed and God is rightly worshipped. This is the *ecclesia dei* from which Cain has been excommunicated and into which any of his descendants who were saved must somehow have been incorporated.⁵² The *ecclesia diaboli*, on the other hand, is located concretely in Cain's household. It has no certain promise, and its characteristic marks are false faith, false worship. However, the false church itself includes some—Calmana and some of her offspring—who within the false church retained true faith in the true God. As becomes clear elsewhere in Luther's retelling of the patriarchal histories, the reverse is also true: false faith was found in the true church. In short, true faith and false faith mark both the true church and the false church. This double line of division between the churches is clearly reflected in Luther's retelling of the story of the birth of Cain's firstborn. In the name Calmana gave to her firstborn (Enoch, "dedicate"), he sees both a sign of her faith and an intimation that she and her husband knew about the *fortuita misericordia*. Real as the external division between the true and false churches may be, the crucial dividing line runs through the human heart.

Esau and His Progeny (Genesis 36)

"In Esau," Luther says, "there is commended an example of divine patience also in the reprobate."⁵³ The reprobation Luther has in mind here is not the eternal rejection of hell, but a temporal rejection like the one where God chose Isaac and not Ishmael. In this case, Jacob, not Esau, was chosen as the patriarch through whom the promised "Seed of the woman" would eventually be born. Similarly, the promise and the oracles of God were given uniquely to the people of Israel (i.e., Jacob). These people were distinguished from the Gentiles in a manner analogous to the difference between Jacob and Esau. Nevertheless, even though the Gentiles did not have the promise given to Israel, they did receive mercy: "It is necessary to distinguish between the promise and truth and accidental mercy [*inter promissionem ac veritatem et misericordiam fortuitam*]. We have mercy without the promise [*sine promissione*]; the Jews have mercy with the promise

52. Luther clearly indicates that the salvation of the Cainite outsiders necessarily meant their being joined to the one true church of Adam. WA 42.243: "Quare, si qui ex posteritate Cain sunt salvati, hos cum hac Ecclesia coniungi necesse fuit." Cf. LW 1.330. But Luther does not explain concretely what that would mean. Did the saved Cainites physically leave their progenitor's civilization and return to that of Adam? Or was entry into the true church more a matter of a change of heart? The story of Cain's faithful wife, Calmana, suggests that the latter is what Luther had in mind.

53. WA 44.210; LW 6.283.

[*cum promissione*]."⁵⁴ Once again, Luther's shift to the first person plural is significant. Together with all the Gentiles, he stands on the "Cainite" side of the line that seemed, in his comments on Gen 4, to mark the division between the true church and the false. Here this line separates not the two churches, but the families *through whom* the promise was fulfilled and the families *for whom* it was fulfilled. Outsiders to the promise, Esau and his people nevertheless were "not excluded from mercy." Indeed, Luther counts Esau himself as a great preacher of the gospel, one who promoted the true worship of God. "On the other hand," he complains, "the sons of the promise lose the blessing when they are proud."⁵⁵ To the faith of the reprobated Esau, Luther opposes the faithlessness later found among some of the chosen Jacob's heirs.

The Egyptians (Genesis 47)

A final instance of *fortuita misericordia* is found in Luther's comments on Gen 47. Here he also takes issue with the assertion of the Zurich reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, that the company of heaven would include the so-called righteous pagans.⁵⁶ Against Zwingli, Luther insists that the outsiders to the patriarchal families who were saved by *fortuita misericordia* must somehow have been "attached" to the church. He also makes explicit the parallel between the reach of "accidental mercy" in the Old Testament and the spread of the gospel in the New Testament: "God did this before the birth of Christ, and since the incarnation of Christ he observes the same method of gathering the church to a far greater extent, now that the Gospel has been spread among all nations."⁵⁷ The difference is one of de-

54. WA 44.211; LW 6.284.

55. WA 44.211; LW 6.285.

56. Zwingli had offered the following description of what believers would see in heaven: "the communion and fellowship of all the saints and sages and believers and the steadfast and the brave and the good who have ever lived since the world began. . . . Hercules too and Theseus, Socrates, Aristides, Antigonus, Numa, Camillus, the Catos and Scipios; Louis the Pious and your predecessors the Louis, Philips, Pepins and all your ancestors who have departed this life in faith. In short there has not lived a single good man, there has not been a single pious heart or believing soul from the beginning of the world to the end, which you will not see there in the presence of God." "Exposition of the Faith," in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 275–76. For an evaluation of Zwingli's position, see Gregory J. Miller's essay in *The Reformation Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Carter Lindberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 157–69. Miller sets Zwingli's rather untraditional optimism within the framework of his theology of the sovereignty and unfettered freedom of God: "Zwingli asserts that salvation comes through Christ alone as a result of God's free election of individuals, regardless of the individual's actual knowledge of Christ. Therefore, it is possible for a gentile to be a Christian without even knowing anything about Christ. . . . Ultimately, no outward means at all are necessary for salvation, including sacraments, church, Scripture, or even knowledge of Christ" (160).

57. WA 44.677; LW 8.134.

gree, but not of kind. In the Old Testament, the message of the coming Savior reached only those nations that came into contact with the patriarchs, while in the New Testament the gospel has gone out to "all nations." But for Luther the gospel has always had an outward trajectory, which means that outsiders to the people of the promise were always being included among the saved.

However, this did not take place, as Zwingli had argued, apart from explicit faith in the word.

Thus we also say that very many nations even from the line or stock of Cain have been saved. For many were converted by fortuitous mercy because they attached themselves to the church which had the oracles of God. . . . This means, of course, that a heathen or unbeliever became a believer. For after believing the Word which he heard, he was a member of the church and no longer a heathen.⁵⁸

The salvation of the outsider does not diminish the significance of the distinction between the false church and the true, because saving faith by definition includes incorporation into the true church.

With this in mind, we can understand the vehemence of Luther's rejection of Zwingli's position:

Therefore I do not declare with Zwingli that *the Cainite church* or Numa Pompilius and men like him were saved and became heirs of the kingdom of heaven. . . . I know that some 15 years ago many were of the opinion that anyone was saved in his own faith. What else is this than making *one church* out of all the enemies of Christ? From this it will soon follow that the Word and God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, were sent in vain. Then there will be no difference between the Turks, the papists, the Jews, and us, who have the Word.⁵⁹

Although he does not explain the matter as clearly as we might like, Luther's mention of the opinion that "anyone was saved in his own faith" (*homo in sua fide salvaretur*) is crucial. On Luther's account, this amounts to an error of world historical proportions, for it erases the significance of the distinction between the false church and the true. It is inconsistent with Luther's salvific necessity of word and faith, and, worse yet, it renders the Incarnation superfluous. It is not at all, then, that Luther cannot abide Zwingli's generosity. As we have seen, Luther himself is remarkably generous toward the biblical outsiders. Instead, Luther strenuously rejects Zwingli's view because he believes that it falsifies the world's true

58. WA 44.677-78; LW 8.134-36.

59. WA 44.678-79; LW 8.135-36. Emphasis mine.

story, at the center of which stands the perpetual struggle not just between the two churches, but between God and the devil.⁶⁰

Lastly, it is important to note that Luther's perspective here has been reversed. He puts himself and other Christians in the position previously occupied by the Jews: *we* "have the Word." Therefore, believers stand within the true church looking out on all those—"the Turks, the papists, the Jews"—who do not have that word. Luther has come full circle as a reader, standing not with Cain's progeny in the position of the Gentile outsider grateful for an unexpected mercy, but in the missionary position of the Christian insider who benefits from the sure mercy of God within the *ecclesia vera*, and who knows that the accidental mercy of God is at work to preserve the lives and prolong the histories of outsiders so that they, too, can one day turn to saving faith. Luther places himself, in other words, at varying locations within the biblical narrative, depending on whether he speaks of himself with faith, or without. With faith in the promise given in God's word, one is an insider, heir to a mercy that has been made sure; without faith in such a sure and certain promise, one remains an outsider to whom salvation can come only as a mercy utterly unexpected.

THEOLOGICAL EXEGESIS: THE MERCIFUL GOD

Between the lectures on Gen 4 in 1536 and the lectures on Gen 46 in 1545, Luther's use of the term *fortuita misericordia* was remarkably consistent.⁶¹ It denoted a serendipity, the happy appearance of divine mercy where it had been neither promised nor expected. It was a marker, so to speak, for all those who, like Luther, had once been surprised by grace. Accidental mercy marked the spread of the *word* of promise beyond the familial boundaries of the *people* of the promise. At the same time, Luther's exegetical application of the concept of *fortuita misericordia* clearly developed. In his remarks on the story of Cain, he emphasized the struggle between the *ecclesia falsa* and the *ecclesia vera* in a way that implied their clear separation. In his remarks on Cain's wife, however, the lines between the

60. This struggle is the central theme in Heiko Oberman's *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

61. This is significant not only for the broader understanding of Luther's theology, but for confirming the reliability of the *Genesis Lectures* as well. For another study that suggests theological consistency in the *Lectures*, see David Whitford, "Cura Religionis or Two Kingdoms: The Late Luther on Religion and the State in the *Lectures on Genesis*," *Church History* 73 (March 2004): 41–62, esp. 42n9.

churches became more complex and permeable. Finally, in his interpretation of the stories of Esau and Joseph, he drew attention to the parallel between the calling in of outsiders in the Old Testament and the proclamation of the gospel in the New. This suggests most obviously Luther's powerful confidence in the gospel, but it also confirms and fleshes out Trigg's conclusion that Luther never allowed the clear marks that distinguished the true visible church from the false to obviate either the requirement of faith or the temptation of unbelief.

The ecclesial condition Luther confirmed by means of this exegetical analysis was precisely the one he believed obtained in his own day, that is, the true church within and alongside the false—not two churches, but one church, “twofold,” herself the arena within which the battle between God and the devil is being fought.⁶² The cosmic dimension of this struggle also draws our attention to the broader narrative structure of Luther's understanding of human history. Luther's overarching metanarrative, if I may put it in those terms, posited continuity across the vast sweep of human history and civilization, from Adam and Eve right down to life in sixteenth-century Wittenberg. Matters of the heart, and relations between the two churches, are now as ever they have been. Of course, one might well ask whether Luther's worldview had been disturbed by the recent discovery of the “New World.” Did his arguably overconfident readings of the patriarchal histories evidence a dawning awareness of the questions that would be occasioned by the discoveries of peoples who had never heard the Christian gospel? Probably not. Luther was only dimly aware of the discovery of the New World in his day.⁶³ More importantly, he thought of the word of God as universal not only in its *final reach* (i.e., when the gospel has at last in fact been proclaimed to “all creatures”), but in its *origins* as well. The human race as a whole is descended from our “first parents.” Given that solidarity, questions could be raised about when or how a particular people had first been cut off from the holy households marked by the faithful proclamation of the word of God, but there could

62. Cf. Trigg, *Baptism*, 192–93: “For Luther, to attempt a total separation of the true Church from the false Church would be unthinkable, because it would constitute an attempt to make the purity of the Church visible, and to make its concealed glory available for human inspection. Such an attempt rebounds upon itself—it leads nowhere other than back to the false, self-confident Church of Esau, which relies, not on the promises of God, but upon the ‘birthright’ of its own religious status. . . . Luther's true Church itself has something of the nature of quicksilver about it; it cannot be grasped, and it eludes precise delineation. This is because in this world it cannot be seen in isolation from the false Church; or it would perhaps be more appropriate to say that it is not available in detachment from the false Church in this age. The more insistently the claim of truth and purity is made for a given Church, the more clearly it identifies itself as false.”

63. On this issue, one may consult the brief study of Reinhard Schwarz, “Martin Luther on the European Discovery of America,” *Word & World* 14 (1994): 82–86. According to Schwarz, Luther refers to the discovery of America only three times.

be no question that somewhere in their history that word had been heard. The concept of *fortuita misericordia*, moreover, was addressed precisely to such separated people. Accidental, fortuitous, or serendipitous as ever the mercy of God may have been, this phrase signals that for Luther one "dares to hope" because the word of God has always been active, even among "reprobate" peoples who have become foreigners to the promise.

Hope in God's word, of course, is nothing less than hope in God, and this reveals the fundamental theological conviction that informs Luther's exegesis of the stories of the biblical outsiders examined above. The stories of *all* the characters of the Old Testament, even the "reprobate," are occasions of decisive encounters with the God Luther himself knew. In Luther's understanding, and perhaps even more fundamentally in his experience, it is proper to God as God truly is to have mercy, to seek out sinners, and to save. The saving mercy that finds its expression in God's will to save, this is the *opus proprium dei*.⁶⁴ What is at stake, then, in the stories of the biblical outsiders is nothing less than the *character of God*. Luther reads these stories in such a way that this particular truth about God—given in the faith in which the Christian is baptized, and clearly set forth in the *regula fidei*—illuminates both text and reader, revealing hope even for those who seem beyond hope. Put differently, Luther's exegetical optimism is the reverse side of his understanding of the *misericordia dei*. Hope for the hopeless lies neither in God's justice, as with Zwingli, nor in the requirements of a consistent theological system, as with Origen, but in the merciful heart of God.

Finally, the examination of Luther's invention and evolving classroom application of the term *fortuita misericordia* reminds us that the question of the obvious inequities between people in their access to the means of grace is not at all new. Nor is the ecumenical question of salvation across various real or perceived ecclesial boundaries, including those that were beginning to divide the western Catholic Church in Luther's day. In both these cases, Luther pointed toward confidence in the merciful character of God as sure ground for Christian hope. And insofar as he directs us constructively back to the vantage point of divine mercy for any consideration of the fate of ecclesial outsiders, as well as the danger of unbelief regardless of one's ecclesial location, he remains, in George Yule's felicitous phrase, a "theologian for Catholics and Protestants."⁶⁵

64. For the distinction between the "alien" and "proper" work of God, see the explanation to thesis 16 in the Heidelberg Disputation. WA 1.360–61; LW 31.50–1.

65. I refer to Yule's edited volume, *Luther: Theologian for Catholics and Protestants* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985).