

The Babylonian Captivity of the Church

1520

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of his German treatise *Address to the Christian Nobility (An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation)*, Luther dropped a hint of what was coming next: “I know another little song about Rome and the Romanists. If their ears are itching to hear it, I will sing that one to them, too—and pitch it in the highest key!” This “little song” Luther would call a “prelude” on the captivity of the Roman church—or the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, published just a few months later in October of 1520. A polemical treatise, it was truly “pitched high,” with Luther hiding little of his dissatisfaction with the prevalent sacramental practices sanctioned by Rome. Although he fully expected the work to elicit a cacophony of criticisms from his opponents, Luther’s positive aim was to set forth a reconsideration of the sacramental Christian life that centered on the Word. His thesis is that the papacy had distorted the sacraments with its own traditions and regulations, transforming them into a system of control and coercion. The evangelical liberty of the sacramental promises had been replaced by a papal absolutism that, like a feudal lordship, claimed its own jurisdictional liberties and privileges over the totality of Christian life through a sacramental system that spanned birth to death. Yet Luther does not replace one tyranny

1. *Anfechtung(en)* embraces several concepts and is not readily translated into a single English word. It can be simply understood as “temptation” or “trial” (Lat. *tentatio*) and is employed in this manner by Luther in his German translation of the Bible. But even these examples do not give a single picture on the nature of the temptation and from whence it comes. In some places *Anfechtung* is a struggle within—a conflict with flesh and spirit (e.g., Matt. 26:41); in other places the trial seems to come from the outside—from enemies and persecutors of the church (Luke 8:13 and James 1:12). In Luther’s writings, he adds to the complexity of the term as he reflects both upon his own personal experiences of *Anfechtung* and the theological implications attached to them. At the basic level, they are experienced as a contradiction of God’s love and protection, a perceived antagonism and hostility to the security of one’s salvation. Satan’s accusations, self-doubt and the weakness of the flesh, and God’s wrath are all various aspects of this experience. Yet for Luther, such trials are ultimately to be received as a blessing from God, a tool of his fatherly love to refine faith and strengthen one’s confidence in God’s Word and promises. Thus, he describes *Anfechtung* as one of the necessary experiences for the making of a Christian theologian: “This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom” (*Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings*, TAL 4).

for another; his argument for a return to the biblical understanding of the sacraments is moderated by a consideration of traditions and external practices in relation to their effects on the individual conscience and faith.

On the one hand, Luther’s treatise is shaped by some of the specific arguments of his opponents. There are two treatises in particular to which Luther reacts. The first is by an Italian Dominican, Isidoro Isolani (c. 1480–1528), who wrote a tract calling for Luther’s recantation, *Revocatio Martini Lutheri Augustiniani ad sanctam sedem* (1519). The second writing, appearing in July of 1520, was by the Leipzig theologian Augustinus Alveld (c. 1480–1535), who argued against Luther on the topic of communion in “both kinds.” In some sense, the *Babylonian Captivity* serves as Luther’s reply.

But Luther’s ideas on the sacraments had been in development for some time before. His early personal struggles with penance and the Mass are well known and were the context for much of his *Anfechtungen*¹ and spiritual trials in the monastery. Likewise, his subsequent clarity on the teaching of justification and faith quickly reshaped his thinking on the sacramental life. By 1519, he had decided that only three of the seven sacraments could be defined as such on the basis of Scripture, publishing a series of sermons that year on the sacraments of penance, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper.^a In 1520, he wrote another, more extensive treatise on the Lord’s Supper, a *Treatise on the New Testament*. In all of these works, the sacrament chiefly consists in the divine promise and the faith which grasps it. So it is in the *Babylonian Captivity*, where the correlative of faith and promise is the *leitmotif* that runs through the entire work.

As Luther discusses each of the sacraments, he exhibits a remarkable combination of detailed, penetrating biblical interpretation and pastoral sensitivity for the common person. In fact, it is precisely the perceived lack of attention to Scripture and to pastoral care that drives Luther’s ire and polemic. Christians are being fleeced, coerced, and misled by those who should be guiding and caring for consciences. The errors of Rome are

^a *The Sacrament of Penance* (LW 35:9–23; WA 2:714–23); *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism* (LW 35:29–45; WA 2:727–37); *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and the Brotherhoods* (LW 35:49–73; WA 2:742–58). All are included in TAL 1.

intolerable because they are so injurious to faith. The most egregious for Luther was how the Eucharist was understood and practiced. Here he identifies three “captivities” of the Mass by which the papacy imprisons the Christian church: the reservation of the cup, the doctrine of transubstantiation, and the use of the Mass as a sacrifice and work to gain divine favor. In all three of these areas, Luther focuses on the pastoral implications of Rome’s misuse and tyranny.

The *Babylonian Captivity* is written in Latin, attesting to the technical nature of the topic and to the education of Luther’s audience. It is clear that he assumes for his reader at least a broad knowledge of Scholastic theology and, for his humanist readership, a facility with classical allusions which, relative to Luther’s other writings, are not infrequent. The reception of the work was a mixed one. Georg Spalatin (1484–1545), the elector’s secretary,² was worried about the effects the tone would have. Erasmus³ believed (perhaps rightly) that the breach was now irreparable. Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558) was appalled upon his first reading, but upon closer study became convinced that Luther was in the right, and soon became Luther’s trusted colleague, co-reformer, and friend. Henry VIII of England (1491–1547) even entered into the fray, writing his own refutation of Luther, a *Defense of the Seven Sacraments*, for which he received the title *Fidei defensor* from the pope. The papal bull⁴ threatening Luther with excommunication was already on its way, so in some sense Luther hardly felt he could make matters worse. But in the end, the *Babylonian Captivity* had the effect of galvanizing both opponents and supporters. It became the central work for which Luther had to answer at the Diet of Worms in 1521.

Some of Luther’s expressed positions—though provocative at the time—became less agreeable to his followers later on. In particular, Luther seemed ambivalent regarding the role of laws in civil affairs, suggesting that the gospel was a better guide for rulers. Luther himself deemed this position deficient when faced with the Peasants’ War in 1525. Likewise, when discussing marriage, Luther was inclined to dismiss the manifold laws and regulations that had grown around the institution and rely only on biblical mandates and examples. This led to some of his more controversial remarks regarding the permissibility of bigamy. After the marital scandal of Philip of Hesse,⁵ which ensued in part from following Luther’s advice, these remarks were deemed

2. Spalatin served Elector Frederick III the Wise (b. 1463) from 1509 till Frederick’s death in 1525.

3. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) was a Dutch humanist whose works in moral philosophy and editions of the church fathers and the Greek New Testament made him famous throughout Europe.

4. Pope Leo X (1475–1521) issued the papal bull *Exsurge domine* calling for Luther’s excommunication in 1520.

5. Philip I, landgrave of Hesse (1504–1567), was a supporter of the Reformation and used his political authority to encourage Protestantism in Hesse. Soon after he married Christine of Saxony in 1523, he engaged in an adulterous affair, and by 1526 was considering how to make bigamy permissible. Luther counseled Philip against this, advising Christians to avoid bigamous marriage, except in extreme circumstances.



A portrait of Philip I, Landgrave of Hesse, and his wife Christine of Saxony, painted by Jost V. Hoff.

unacceptable. When Luther's works were first collected and published in Jena and Wittenberg, the publishers excised these portions from Luther's treatise. These sections are indicated in the annotations of this edition.



THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY OF THE CHURCH⁶

A PRELUDE OF MARTIN LUTHER ON THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY OF THE CHURCH

Jesus

MARTIN LUTHER, AUGUSTINIAN, to his friend, Hermann Tulich,⁷ greeting.

Whether I wish it or not, I am compelled to become more learned every day, with so many and such able masters eagerly driving me on and making me work. Some two years ago I wrote on indulgences, but in such a way that I now deeply regret having published that little book.⁸ At that time I still clung with a mighty superstition to the tyranny of Rome, and so I held that indulgences should not be altogether rejected, seeing that they were approved by the common consent of so many. No wonder, for at the time it was only I rolling this boulder by myself.⁹ Afterwards, thanks to Sylvester,¹⁰ and aided by those friars who so strenuously defended indulgences, I saw that they were nothing but impostures of the Roman flatterers, by which they rob people of their money and their faith in God. Would that I could prevail upon the booksellers and persuade all who have read them to burn the whole of my booklets on indulgences,^b and instead of all that I have written on this subject adopt this proposition: INDULGENCES ARE WICKED DEVICES OF THE FLATTERERS OF ROME.

^b In addition to the *Ninety-Five Theses*, WA 1:233–38; LW 31:17–33; TAL 1:13–46, these include: *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, WA 1:525–628; *A Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*, WA 1:243–56; *The Freedom of the “Sermon on Papal Indulgences and Grace” of Doctor Martin Luther against the “Refutation,” Being Completely Fabricated to Insult That Very Sermon*, WA 1:380–93.

⁶ The English translation for this edition is a revision of that which is found in vol. 36 of *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 3–126. The revisions are based on WA 6:497–573, and *Martin Luther: Studien Ausgabe*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1982), 168–259. Annotations and footnotes are the work of the editors but are also informed by notes included in previous critical editions.

⁷ Hermann Tulich was born at Steinheim (c. 1488), near Paderborn, in Westphalia. He studied in Wittenberg in 1508 and in 1512 matriculated at the University of Leipzig where he was a proofreader in Melchior Lotter’s printing house. He returned to Wittenberg in 1519 and received the doctorate in 1520 and became professor of poetry. He was a devoted supporter of Luther. Eventually he became rector of the Johanneum gymnasium at Lüneberg from 1532 until his death on 28 July 1540.

⁸ Luther apparently is referring to the *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* (1518), WA 1:522f.; LW 31:83–252; but compare also *A Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* (1518), WA 1:243–56, written around the same time. There he noted that indulgences were not necessary, yet he deemed them permissible for “lazy Christians.” See also TAL 1:57–66.

⁹ A reference to the Greek myth of Sisyphus rather than, as some have suggested, to the proverb from Erasmus’s *Adagia* (2, 4, 40): *Saxum volutum non obducitur musco*—“a rolling stone gathers no moss.”

¹⁰ Sylvester Prierias (i.e., Mazzolini), from Prierio in Piedmont (1456–1523), was a Dominican prior. As an official court theologian for Pope Leo X

(*magistri sacri palati*, “Master of the Sacred Palace”), Prierias was ordered to provide theological critique of Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses*. In 1518, Prierias wrote his *Dialogus de potestate papae* (“Dialogue on the Power of the Pope”), which set out a general critique of Luther’s arguments against the theology behind indulgences. Like Luther’s other opponents (the Dominicans Johann Tetzel [1475–1521] and Jacob van Hoogstraaten (c. 1460–1527), as well as Johann Eck), Prierias shifted the debate toward church authority rather than focusing solely on the question of indulgences.

11. Johann Eck (born Maier; 1486–1543), from the Swabian village of Eck, became professor at Ingolstadt in Bavaria in 1510. His opposition to Luther began with his criticism of the *Ninety-Five Theses* in his *Obelisci*, which led to heated exchanges with Luther and his colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486–1541) and culminated with the Leipzig Disputation in 1519. Hieronymus Emser (1477–1527), the secretary and chaplain of Duke George of Saxony (1471–1539), had been a humanist professor at Erfurt in the days that Luther attended. Emser published several works against Luther after the Leipzig debate. See David V. N. Bagchi, *Luther’s Earliest Opponents: Catholic Controversialists, 1518–1525* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

12. Only a few months before, Luther expressed this opinion in his treatise *On the Papacy in Rome against the Most Celebrated Romanist in Leipzig*, LW 39:49–104. Cf. *Resolutio Lutheriana super propositione sua decima tertia de potestate papae* (1519), WA 2:180–240.

Next, Eck and Emser and their fellow conspirators undertook to instruct me concerning the primacy of the pope.¹¹ Here too, not to prove ungrateful to such learned men, I acknowledge that I have profited much from their labors. For while I denied the divine authority of the papacy, I still admitted its human authority.¹² But after hearing and reading the super-subtle



Johann Eck (1486–1543)

subtleties of these showoffs,^c with which they so adroitly prop up their idol (for my mind is not altogether unteachable in these matters), I now know for certain that the papacy is the kingdom of Babylon and the power of Nimrod, the mighty hunter.¹³ Once more, therefore, that all may turn out to my friends' advantage, I beg both the booksellers and my readers that after burning what I have published on this subject they hold to this proposition: THE PAPACY IS THE MIGHTY HUNT OF THE BISHOP OF ROME. This is proved by the arguments of Eck, Emser, and the Leipzig lecturer on the Scriptures.¹⁴

[Communion in Both Kinds]

Now they are making a game of schooling me concerning communion in both kinds¹⁵ and other weighty subjects: this is the task^d lest I listen in vain to these self-serving teachers of mine.¹⁶ A certain Italian friar of Cremona has written a "Recantation of Martin Luther before the Holy See," which is not that I revoke anything, as the words declare, but that he revokes me.¹⁷ This is

^c The original Latin here is *Trossulorum*, a reference to Roman knights who conquered the city of Trossulum in Etruria (central Italy) without the aid of foot soldiers (*Pliny* 32, 2; *Seneca*, ep. 87). Later the term was used in a derogatory sense of a conceited dandy.

^d This phrase is perhaps a reference to Virgil's *Aeneid* 6, 129: "... *Hoc opus, hic labor est*" ("that is the work, that is the task"), wherein the Sibyl warns Aeneas that his desire to enter Hades is simple; it is *leaving* hell that is the difficult task.

13. A reference to Gen. 10:8-9: "Cush fathered Nimrod; he was the first on earth to be a mighty man. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD. Therefore it is said, 'Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the LORD.'" Luther here voices the criticism that the pope was seeking power rather than being a good pastor. So he describes the pope as a "mighty hunter" and his use of authority as a "mighty hunt" rather than describing him as a shepherd tending the sheep.

14. Augustinus Alveld was a Franciscan professor at Leipzig who wrote a treatise against Luther in April of 1520, *Concerning the Apostolic See, Whether It Is a Divine Law or Not*, which sparked Luther's response *On the Papacy in Rome* (see n.8 above).

15. In June 1520, Alveld wrote a treatise against Luther on communion in both kinds, *Tractatus de communione sub utraque specie*. Luther already proposed restoring the cup to the laity in two earlier treatises: *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods* (1519), LW 35:50; TAL 1:225-56; and *Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, the Holy Mass* (1520), LW 35:106-7.

16. The original Latin here is *Cratippus meos*, a reference to Cratippus of Pergamon (first century BCE), a philosopher who taught in Athens. Because he was an instructor of Cicero's son, Cratippus gained the famed orator's favor, thereby gaining Roman citizenship. The reference is consistent with Luther's opinion of his opponents as flatterers and sycophants.

17. Isidoro Isolani, a Dominican from Milan, published *Revocatio Martini Lutheri Augustiniani ad sanctam sedem* on 22 November 1519 in Cremona.

18. A barb that would certainly delight his humanist readers.

19. Tomasso de Vio (Cardinal) Cajetan (1469–1534), vicar general of the Dominican order and influential Aquinas scholar, interviewed Luther at Augsburg in 1518 as papal legate in order to acquire a recantation. His three-day debate with Luther on indulgences, Aquinas, canon law, and church authority was recounted and critically reviewed by Luther in his published *Proceedings at Augsburg* (1518), LW 31:253–92; TAL 1:121–66.

20. Luther’s response to Sylvester Prierias, *Ad dialogum Silvestri Prieratis de potestate papae responsio*, was published in 1518.

21. The title page of Alveld’s treatise contained twenty-six lines. The “clogs” (*calopodia* = *calcipodium*) that Luther mentioned were the wooden-soled sandals worn by the Observant Franciscans.

22. Luther is referring to the unusual spelling, IHSVH, for Jesus that Alveld tries to justify by arguments which involve an admixture of the three languages.

23. Alveld belonged to the stricter part of the Franciscan order, known as the Observantines. Luther is playing on this word.

the kind of Latin the Italians are beginning to write nowadays.¹⁸ Another friar, a German of Leipzig, that same lecturer, as you know, on the whole canon of Scripture^e has written against me concerning the sacrament in both kinds and is about to perform, as I understand, still greater and more marvelous things. The Italian^f was canny enough to conceal his name, fearing perhaps the fate of Cajetan¹⁹ and Sylvester.²⁰ The man of Leipzig, on the other hand, as becomes a fierce and vigorous German, boasts on his ample title page of his name, his life, his sanctity, his learning, his office, his fame, his honor, almost his very clogs.²¹ From him I shall doubtless learn a great deal, since he writes his dedicatory epistle to the Son of God himself: so familiar are these saints with Christ who reigns in heaven! Here it seems three magpies are addressing me, the first in good Latin, the second in better Greek, the third in the best Hebrew.²² What do you think, my dear Hermann, I should do, but prick up my ears?²³ The matter is being dealt with at Leipzig by the “Observance” of the Holy Cross.²³



Cajetan (at the table, far left) and Luther (standing right) at Augsburg. Colored woodcut from Ludwig Rabus, *Historien der Heyligen Ausserwählten Gottes Zeugen* (Straßburg, 1557).

^e I.e., Alveld.

^f I.e., Isolani.

Fool that I was, I had hitherto thought that it would be a good thing if a general council were to decide that the sacrament should be administered to the laity in both kinds.^h This view our more-than-learned friar would correct, declaring that neither Christ nor the apostles had either commanded or advised that both kinds be administered to the laity; it was therefore left to the judgment of the church what to do or not to do in this matter, and the church must be obeyed. These are his words.

You will perhaps ask, what madness has entered into the man, or against whom is he writing? For I have not condemned the use of one kind, but have left the decision about the use of both kinds to the judgment of the church. This is the very thing he attempts to assert, in order to attack me with this same argument. My answer is that this sort of argument is common to all who write against Luther: either they assert the very things they assail, or they set up a man of straw whom they may attack. This is the way of Sylvester and Eck and Emser, and of the men of Cologne and Louvain,²⁴ and if this friar had not been one of their kind, he would never have written against Luther.

This man turned out to be more fortunate than his fellows, however, for in his effort to prove that the use of both kinds was neither commanded nor advised, but left to the judgment of the church, he brings forward the Scriptures to prove that the use of one kind for the laity was ordained by the command of Christ.ⁱ So it is true, according to this new interpreter of the Scriptures, that the use of one kind was not commanded and at the same time was commanded by Christ! This novel kind of argument is, as you know, the one which these dialecticians²⁵ of Leipzig are especially fond of using. Does not Emser profess to speak fairly of me in his earlier book,²⁶ and then, after I had convicted him of the foulest envy and shameful lies, confess, when about to confute me in his later book,^j that both were true, and that he has written in both a friendly and an unfriendly spirit? A fine fellow, indeed, as you know!

g "Aures arrigam," a common classical turn of phrase, cf. Terence, *Andria* 5, 4, 30; Virgil, *Aeneid* 1, 152; Erasmus, *Adagia* 3, 2, 56.

h See *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods* (1519), LW 35:45–74; TAL 1:225–56. Cf. *Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, the Holy Mass* (1520), LW 35:106–7.

i See below where Luther details Alveld's interpretation of John 6.

j *A venatione Luteriana aegocerotis assertio* (1519).

24. In February of 1520, the theological faculties of Louvain and Cologne published a condemnation of Luther's doctrine based on his collected Latin writings as printed by the Basel printer Johann Froben in 1518.

25. A name derived from the discipline of dialectic, or logic, which was one of the three basic disciplines of medieval education, along with grammar and rhetoric.

26. Emser first published a report of the Leipzig debate between Luther and Eck with his interpretation of it, *De disputatione Lipsicensi, quantum ad Boemos obiter deflexa est* (1519).

But listen to our distinguished distinguisher of “kinds,” to whom the decision of the church and the command of Christ are the same thing, and again the command of Christ and no command of Christ are the same thing. With such dexterity he proves that only one kind should be given to the laity, by the command of Christ, that is, by the decision of the church. He puts it in capital letters, thus: THE INFALLIBLE FOUNDATION. Then he treats John 6[:35, 41] with incredible wisdom, where Christ speaks of the bread of heaven and the bread of life, which is he himself. The most learned fellow not only refers these words to the Sacrament of the Altar, but because Christ says: “I am the living bread” [John 6:51] and not “I am the living cup,” he actually concludes that we have in this passage the institution of the sacrament in only one kind for the laity. But here follow the words: “For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed” [John 6:55] and, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood” [John 6:53]. When it dawned upon the good friar that these words speak undeniably for both kinds and against one kind—presto! how happily and learnedly he slips out of the quandary by asserting that in these words Christ means to say only that whoever receives the sacrament in one kind receives therein both flesh and blood. This he lays down as his “infallible foundation” of a structure so worthy of the holy and heavenly “Observance.”

I pray you now to learn along with me from this that in John 6 Christ commands the administration of the sacrament in one kind, yet in such a way that his commanding means leaving it to the decision of the church; and further that Christ is speaking in this same chapter only of the laity and not of the priests. For to the latter the living bread of heaven, that is the sacrament in one kind, does not belong, but perhaps the bread of death from hell! But what is to be done with the deacons and subdeacons,²⁷ who are neither laymen nor priests? According to this distinguished writer they ought to use neither the one kind nor both kinds! You see, my dear Tulich, what a novel and “Observant” method of treating Scripture this is.

But learn this too: In John 6 Christ is speaking of the Sacrament of the Altar, although he himself teaches us that he is speaking of faith in the incarnate Word, for he says: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” [John 6:29]. But we’ll have to give him credit: this Leipzig professor

27. Subdeacons and deacons are the fifth and sixth of the seven offices through which clergy advanced to the priesthood. Theologians debated whether these middle offices participated in the sacrament of Holy Orders until the Council of Trent decided that they did. For a discussion of the seven offices, see Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, II:9:2 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1978).