

Martin Luther in his Table Talk once said, "True theology is practical."<sup>1</sup> For Luther, the doctrines of Scripture existed to show how a Christian should believe and live. Nothing was speculative; nothing was superfluous. By the same token, Luther's eschatology and interpretation of prophecy were not merely obscure predictions or trivial details, but were determined realities for the end times with practical implications for a Christian's life and actions. The eschatological role of the Turks likewise established practical consequences for a Christian. Although Luther's political and pastoral engagement of the Turks are generally separated from his eschatological understanding of their role in history, in fact it seems more likely that the eschatology provided the basis of his political and pastoral advice.

From the prophecy of Daniel 7, Luther concluded three determined realities that shaped his entire perspective on the Turks: (1) the Turks would never conquer European Christianity; (2) they would never be conquered by European Christianity; and (3) they would always oppress Christianity militarily. These details taken as a whole gave the Turks a unique role as a temporal scourge in the hand of God to work repentance and to purify the Christian church. Furthermore, the predetermined role of aggressor for the Turks allowed Luther generally to advocate war against the Turks by secular authorities because of its defensive nature. In spite of some outward appearances, Luther's eschatological perspective of the Turks was not pessimistic but practical in that he used predetermined realities as a basis for advising secular rulers and Christians in general.

#### LUTHER'S BASIS FOR IDENTIFYING THE TURKS IN DANIEL

As is well-known, Daniel's vision of four beasts notes that each is an empire (7:17). The fourth empire, with its ten horns, has ten constituent kingdoms (7:7, 24), but an additional "little horn" emerges and displaces three of the ten other horns (7:8, 20). This "little horn" wages war against the saints and prevails over them for a time (7:21). The general medieval interpretation of Daniel's prophecy was that the Roman Empire was the fourth beast with its ten horns signifying ten nations that were once part of the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Luther was confident, however, that the Turks must also appear in the prophecies of Scripture because "the Turk is also so great and powerful... [and] such a powerful thing has to be stated in Scripture."<sup>3</sup>

The unique military aggression of the Turks and their success against the Christian vestiges of the Roman Empire were the eschatological hallmarks that connected them to the "little horn."<sup>4</sup> At the outset of his discussion, Luther noted these parallels only in general, observing that the

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<sup>1</sup> *Luther's Works: American Edition* (AE), 75 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown (Saint Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–), 54:22.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes Ehmann, *Luther, Türken und Islam*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte 80 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 2008), 314; Hartmut Bobzin, "Aber itzt ... hab ich den Alcoran gesehen Latinisch ...' Gedanken Martin Luthers zum Islam," in *Luther zwischen den Kulturen*, ed. Hans Medick and Peer Schmidt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2004), 274–275; Rudolf Mau, "Luthers Stellung zu den Türken," in *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546*, ed. Helmar Junghans (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1983), 654.

<sup>3</sup> *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (WA), 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–), 30/2:166.20–23.

<sup>4</sup> WA 30/2:167.12.

Turks' timeless and sole intent was warfare against Christianity. The assaults of the Turks were unlike previous persecutions in that he considered all past persecutions to be the result of specific individuals and not as the institutionalized purpose of a nation. Luther remarked that historically "if there was a king who persecuted [Christians], there would be another king after him who was good and left them alone, such that it wasn't the kingdom or authorities per se who strove against Christ but rather the persons who had the authority who were wicked from time to time."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, he saw the Turks as "entirely established and bent on aggression with the sword and warfare against Christ and those who belong to him."<sup>6</sup> Even though he wrote his *Military Sermon* shortly after the Turkish withdrawal from Vienna in 1529, he believed there could be no lasting peace between the Turks and the Christian West: "The sword and kingdom of Muhammad is in and of itself set directly against Christ as though it had nothing else to do and could have no better use for its sword than blaspheming and fighting against Christ. Its Qur'an and actions attest to that as well."<sup>7</sup> Thus the Turk had a special place in Christian history because of the uniqueness of its institutionalized and unceasing hostility, and as such must be fulfilling the role of the "little horn."

The Turks not only had a hostile intent, they also had the military successes needed to bring their goal ever closer to a physical reality. In general, Luther observed that Turk "has good fortune in waging war against Christians and usually gains the upper hand and obtains the victory... [but] here in Daniel it is announced beforehand that Christians are punished here on earth on account of their sin and the innocent are made into martyrs."<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the Turks had the ambition and victory worthy of the eschatological foe Luther found in the "little horn."

More concretely, however, Luther connected the Turks with the "little horn" because they had already displaced three of the ten horns or three of the traditional vestiges of the Roman Empire. The Turks had conquered Egypt, Asia Minor, and Greece, which according to Luther's reckoning, was a clear fulfillment of Daniel 7:24.<sup>9</sup> They also "emerged from meager beginnings," which explains why it is their horn is "little."<sup>10</sup> Because Luther saw the conquest of three Roman fragments at the hands of the Turks in recent history, he could draw no other conclusion than that those historical details were identical to the details prophesied by Daniel.

That the "little horn" is an entity outside of Christianity and opposed to the God revealed in Christian Scripture further substantiated Luther's interpretation and eschatology. Daniel 7:25 prophesies that the "little horn" will speak against the Most High. Although secondary to Luther's military proofs, it was essential for the Turks to be outside of the Christian faith in order to fulfill their role as the "little horn." Naturally, Luther pointed out the fulfillment of this requirement because the Turks, as Muslims, denied Christ's office and divinity. That the horn "has a mouth which speaks awful things" corresponds to the "horrible blasphemies in which Muhammad not only denies Christ but also fully exalts himself and asserts he is above Christ."<sup>11</sup>

Linking the Turks to the apocalyptic literature of Daniel, however, was likely unoriginal to

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<sup>5</sup> WA 30/2:172.26–29.

<sup>6</sup> WA 30/2:172.21–22.

<sup>7</sup> WA 30/2:172.29–33.

<sup>8</sup> WA 30/2:170.14–21.

<sup>9</sup> WA 30/2:167.5–7.

<sup>10</sup> WA 30/2:167.4–5.

<sup>11</sup> WA 30/2:168.25–29.

Luther himself. He was influenced in his medieval context by Johannes Hilten (ca. 1425–1500), a Franciscan monk of Eisenach, who wrote several comments on Daniel and related its prophecies to the Turks.<sup>12</sup> It appears some ecclesiastical authorities considered Hilten an extremist for his monastic severity and sentenced him to imprisonment where he eventually died in Eisenach around 1500. On a few occasions, Philipp Melanchthon abstracted his knowledge of Hilten's two prophecies. First, he prophesied that one would arise to contest monastic abuses in 1516 (Lutheran reformers later connected this prophecy with Luther). Second, the Turks would conquer and rule Italy and Germany in 1600 or 1606.<sup>13</sup> Luther inquired about Hilten's writings to Friedrich Myconius just prior the composition of the *Military Sermon*, but Myconius was only able to acquire a few fragments of his writings.<sup>14</sup> Because it appears Luther knew the Turkish connection in Hilten's comments on Daniel at that time but few specifics, Hilten's influence on Luther's sermon was probably limited to the premise that Daniel's prophecies included the Turks.

#### DETERMINED ESCHATOLOGICAL REALITIES BASED ON DANIEL 7

Luther's understanding of the Turks as the eschatological fulfillment of Daniel 7 is a significant facet of his engagement with the Turks in that it furnishes three divinely predetermined realities which shape his entire perspective. First, Luther understands that the Turks will never conquer Europe or even another European nation. Because the Roman Empire is the last beast, there can never be another empire. He concluded, "The Turk will never become an emperor nor establish a new or separate empire as he may well have in mind; rather, he will and must certainly fail, or Daniel would be a liar, which is not possible."<sup>15</sup> Also, the "little horn" only displaces three of the ten horns, Egypt, Asia, and Greece, by Luther's calculation. Consequently, Luther believed the Turkish people had reached their territorial limit and could never advance further into Europe on a permanent basis. He says, "Daniel does not give him any more horns. On account of this, it is to be hoped that the Turk henceforth will not conquer any more lands of the Roman Empire.... If he steals away and tears off something at the borders and neighbors, that's his nightcap for a good night."<sup>16</sup> This conclusion, namely that the Turks could never advance further into Europe until the very brink of Judgment Day, naturally affected how Luther understood their battles and successes. Despite their strength, each of their victories must of necessity be short-term and limited in scope until the threshold of Judgment Day.

Luther's confidence in Europe's stability was not isolated to when he wrote his 1529 *Military Sermon*. Throughout his life, he expressed certainty that the Turks would never permanently advance further into Europe. Several scholars have addressed Luther's relationship with the Turks as flavored by a pessimistic outlook that they would engulf or advance further into

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<sup>12</sup> See WA 30/2:149, 30/3:491.32–38; Leonhard Lemmens, "Der Franziskaner Johannes Hiltens," *Römische Quartalschrift* 37 (1929): 315–347; Paul Johansen, "Johann von Hilten in Livland," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 36 (1939): 24–50; Otto Clemen, "Schriften und Lebensausgang des Eisenacher Franziskaners Johann Hilten," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 47 (1928): 402–412; Ehmann, 305; George W. Forell, "Luther and the War against the Turk," *Church History* 14, no. 4 (1945): 259; John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 245–246; Mau, 653.

<sup>13</sup> *Corpus Reformatorum: Phillippi Melanchthons opera quae supersunt omnia* (CR), 28 vols., ed. C. G. Bretschneider and H. E. Bindseil (Halle: C. A. Schwetschke, 1834–1860), 7:995–996, 1006–1007, 25:14; *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, article 27, §1–3.

<sup>14</sup> *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Briefwechsel*, 18 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1930–1985), 5:162, 191.

<sup>15</sup> WA 30/2:166.16–19.

<sup>16</sup> WA 30/2:171.25–172.4.

European Christendom.<sup>17</sup> In fact, as I have demonstrated here, quite the opposite is the case in light of his exegesis of Daniel 7, Luther assessed the Turkish faith and threat convinced they would never permanently conquer their way further into Europe or subject Europe to their rule. Any advances into Europe would be temporary or in direct connection to Judgment Day. In his *Preface to the Prophet Daniel* he asserts on the basis of the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dreams that the German Empire "must remain until the Last Day, no matter how weak it may be."<sup>18</sup> Even toward the end of his life, his *Genesis Lectures* testify to the same confidence. Here he compares the Turks to Hannibal invading Rome: They may ravage and have many victories but will fail to conquer since they cannot "cross the boundaries set up by God."<sup>19</sup> At one point he even swiftly dismisses the hypothetical concern of a Turkish conquest: "What if the Turk should subject the entire world to his rule, something that will never happen? For according to Daniel, Michael will bring aid to the holy people, the church."<sup>20</sup> Thus Luther remained convinced in the overall perseverance of the Christian European nations.

These published assertions of Luther facilitate a better understanding of an inscription in his study concerning the Turks. Near the end of his life, Luther wrote with chalk on the wall, "In 1600 comes the Turk to lay waste to all Germany."<sup>21</sup> Both his 1600 date and prediction on the Turks appear to be a direct influence from Johannes Hilten who made such a prediction for 1600 or 1606.<sup>22</sup> This inscription does not mitigate Luther's belief that the "little horn" would displace no further horns, because he does not speak of permanent conquest and ruling over Germany but of laying waste. His Table Talk expresses a similar thought: "If [the Turk] enters Germany, he enters not to rule but to plunder."<sup>23</sup> Primarily because of his consistency throughout his published works, it seems most likely that if Luther accepted Hilten's prophecy, he still understood it in the eschatological paradigm outlined by his Daniel exegesis – an interpretation which as mentioned was also likely influenced by Hilten to some extent.

Luther's second predetermined reality regarding the Turks was an eschatological counterpart to the overall security of Europe, namely, the impossibility of Christianity, in turn, conquering or suppressing the Turks. Because the Turkish "little horn" of the beast displaced three horns, Luther considered the Turks far more powerful than any one of the remaining seven remnant nations of the Roman Empire.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, since Daniel gives the "little horn" three of the ten "horns," that is, the territory of three nations, there could be no hope of taking those back. Thus, in Luther's estimate, a crusade to retake lost land would not only be contrary to the Christian

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<sup>17</sup> R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 105–106; Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 111; Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 27n36.

<sup>18</sup> AE 35:296.

<sup>19</sup> AE 6:157.

<sup>20</sup> AE 2:181.

<sup>21</sup> *Millesimo Sexcentesimo venit Turcus // Totam Germaniam devastaturus*. Addendum to WA 48:284 (133–134).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Kaufmann, "1600–Deutung der Jahrhundertwende im deutschen Luthertum," in *Jahrhundertwenden*, ed. Manfred Jakobowski-Tiessen, Hartmut Lehmann, Johannes Schilling, and Reinhart Staats (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1999), 97–102; Johannes Ficker, "Eine Inschrift Luthers im Lutherhaus," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 107 (1936): 65–68; CR 7:995–996.

<sup>23</sup> WA Tr 4:131.14–15 (no. 4093). It is also possible that he understood such devastation further into Europe as connected to the Last Days, as quoted above in WA 30/2:171.25–172.4 and elsewhere in WA Tr 2:492 (no. 2498).

<sup>24</sup> WA 30/2:167.6–9, 171.21–25.

faith as he so often taught but was also downright folly and predetermined to fail.

Third, Luther thought Christendom would generally be oppressed at the hands of the Turks on the basis of Daniel 7:21, which says the “little horn” would wage war against the “saints” and defeat them. There was no room in his eschatology for Christianity militarily prevailing overall for the remaining time before Judgment Day. Even though he thought the Turkish attacks could be temporarily stemmed by prayer and repentance, by no means could such devout measures cause Christians to prevail over the Turks, since the Turks were always going to “triumph over the saints and prevail over them.”<sup>25</sup> Luther’s eschatology synthesized two realities that would otherwise be at odds with one another. Though the Turks would never permanently conquer more Christian lands, they would constantly oppress them militarily.

#### PRACTICAL ESCHATOLOGY

Luther’s essentially practical form of eschatology posits that the Turks can be a chastisement from God but simultaneously remain an enemy that Christian rulers and soldiers should fight against. The predetermined overall stalemate relegated the role of the Turks to being a scourge and rod in the hand of God, a temporary pain and punishment to bring Christians to repentance. This role of the Turks was in an incipient form early in Luther’s career, even before his eschatology concerning the Turks. In his *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* (1518), he argues that the pope cannot remit God’s punishment because he cannot drive away the Turks who are the “lash and rod of God.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore he considered fighting against the Turks to be opposing God himself who punishes the people for their sins because they do not punish themselves.<sup>27</sup> At this time he focused his criticism toward ecclesiastical authorities waging wars and crusades. Later, after he systematized his thoughts on temporal authority, Luther felt compelled to clarify and modify his previous assertions to agree with his modified stance. In his *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles* (1521), he asserted he did not mean that the Turk should never be fought but that the Christians should mend their ways first and fight outside of the framework of crusades.<sup>28</sup> He later also emphasized that only secular governments had the right to wage war and wield temporal authority.<sup>29</sup> With this new focus in mind, Luther’s paradigm for fighting the Turks was subsequently always on the basis of his just war doctrine in the sphere of temporal rulers.

Regarding the doctrine on just warfare between independent sovereignties, Luther essentially believed that whoever started a war was “in the wrong.”<sup>30</sup> He fit war with the Turks within the boundaries of a just war by arguing that although individual Christians were not called to resist, temporal authorities must protect their subjects. Hence only temporal rulers could raise an army to fight the Turks in defense of their territory and subjects.

Eschatology was the missing piece of the puzzle that enabled Luther to combine war with the Turks and his notion of a just war. It simplified the contingencies by prophesying in essence that war with the Turks would be defensive, because the Turks would constantly be on the offense. A Christian ruler would not need to doubt whether fighting such a war against them

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther’s Last Battles* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 113; WA 30/2:169.18–19.

<sup>26</sup> AE 31:91–92.

<sup>27</sup> AE 31:92.

<sup>28</sup> AE 32:90.

<sup>29</sup> See especially his treatise *On Temporal Authority* (1523), AE 45:81–129

<sup>30</sup> AE 46:118.

was just because the Turks' wars were prophesied to be offensive and *ipso facto* unjust.<sup>31</sup> Luther condemned fighting an offensive war against the Turks, but with his paradigm, such a war would have clearly been inadvisable against so powerful an adversary as Daniel prophesies.<sup>32</sup>

By rendering such defensive war just, Luther could confidently give pastoral advice encouraging Christian citizens to fight in a secular army. He emphasized that those who fight in battle do not slay innocent blood and those who die in battle die as saints, provided they die in faith.<sup>33</sup> This pastoral advice is the logical conclusion of his political paradigm of the Turks based on his eschatology. Since the Christian nations would always be fighting defensive wars, the soldiers had nothing to fear of killing or dying in battle.

Because of the predetermined stalemate that made the Turks God's chastening scourge, Luther's pastoral advice consequently prescribed repentance and amendment of life whenever the Turkish threat seemed great. Such change and sincere prayer was the only way to find temporary relief from the eschatological oppression. The Turks were a "schoolmaster" who disciplined and taught Christians to fear God, repent, and pray.<sup>34</sup> Although rulers were not fighting as Christian but temporal authorities, their nations were still the eschatological targets of the Turks because of the Christians they contained. The war had to be waged by temporal authorities, but their only hope of alleviating the oppression was with the repentance and prayer of their Christian subjects, although the Turks would generally be fighting against and prevailing upon Christian nations in battle. God was ultimately in control, allowing victories and defeats for his purpose.<sup>35</sup> Because Luther's interpretation of Daniel 7 made constant oppression a determined reality, his eschatology focused on the practical, encouraging general penitence and prayer.

#### CONCLUSION

Luther's eschatology concerning the Turks was not simply an outlook or attitude in view of future predictions but rather a systematic approach to defining their role in the history of the church as the scourge of God. His eschatology delineated not only the extent of Turkish oppression but also the boundaries God had placed on them. These realities in turn were the basis of practical application in the life of a Christian or temporal ruler. The Turks were a scourge in the hand of God who would plague Europe often but never conquer. Luther defanged them of any threat of total conquest and placed them within the framework of his prevalent theme of a Christian's life as one of repentance.<sup>36</sup> Thus Luther's eschatological perspective regarding the inescapable struggles with the Turks was far more complicated than the pessimism some have asserted.<sup>37</sup> His paradigm allowed him to be pessimistic at times about the outcome of particular campaigns in view of widespread impenitence, yet remain confident that they could not conquer.<sup>38</sup> Losses were all part of his understanding of God using the Turks as a "schoolmaster." Just as a schoolmaster would use strict discipline to bring about a positive result, the Turks as a schoolmaster brought chastisement resulting in eventual penitence. The

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<sup>31</sup> WA 30/2:169.5.

<sup>32</sup> AE 46:198.

<sup>33</sup> WA 30/2:173.1–7.

<sup>34</sup> AE 43:224; WA Tr 5:515.27–28 (no. 6155), 517 (nos. 6159, 6161).

<sup>35</sup> WA Tr 5:515.4–5 (no. 6154).

<sup>36</sup> AE 31:25.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Zebiri, 27n3; Gregory J. Miller, "Luther on the Turks and Islam," *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000): 92.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Miller, 92.

Turks as schoolmaster was not a pessimistic characterization; it was a role God had determined and shown already in Daniel's prophecy. His eschatology delineated a determined and entirely eminent purpose for the Turks in God's hand.

Luther's view of the Turks also demonstrates the practical aspect of his eschatology on present circumstances and applications. For him, Christians were living in the End Times with the actualization of Scriptural prophecies surrounding them. Judgment Day was always just around the corner. Luther was confident that in his interpretation of Daniel he had found the predetermined relationship between Christian nations and the Turks. Christians would be oppressed and brought to repentance by such disciplining, but permanent conquest was not going to happen on either side. In Luther's eschatological interpretation of the Turks, one finds a potage of many related theological emphases: the immutability of God's foreknowledge, the just war doctrine, the two kingdoms doctrine, and the Christian life of prayer and penitence. Just as all theology was practical for Luther, so too all eschatology was practical and eminent.