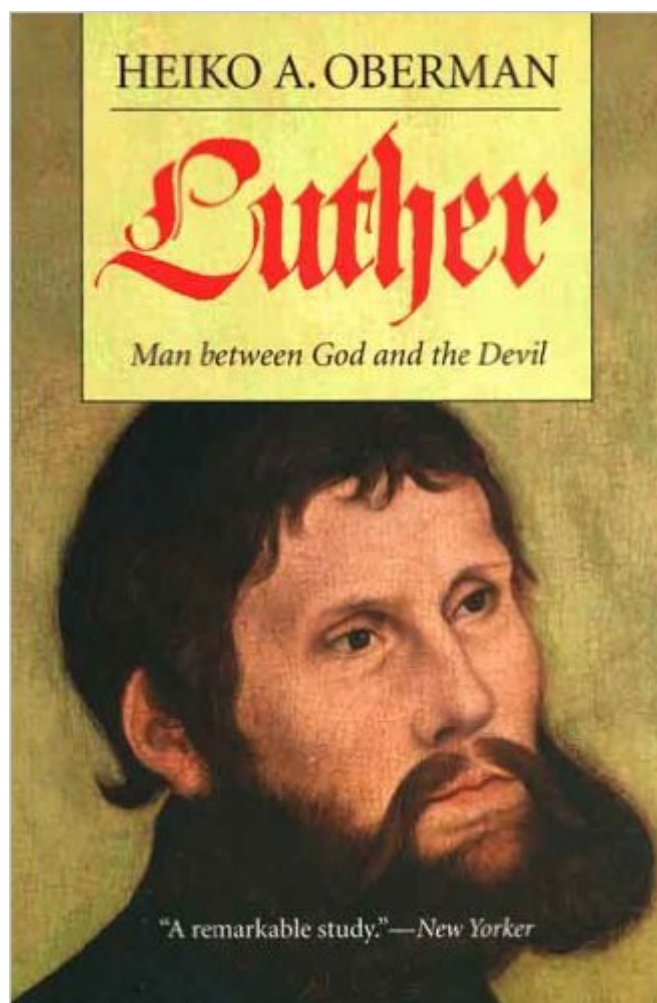


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# Luther: Man Between God And The Devil



## Synopsis

Written by one of the world's greatest authorities on Martin Luther, this is a biography of the central figure of the Protestant Reformation.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In Heiko Oberman's *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, the reader is introduced to Martin Luther, a man who is arguably one of the most important historical figures of the two preceding millennia. In the book, Oberman traces Luther's life from his birth (born November 10th, 1483) to his death (February 18th, 1546), and he ably sketches the cultural, religious, and political environment that surrounded this turbulent era of reformation and revival. While Oberman presents a lucid portrait of the great Wittenberg Reformer, his chief contention throughout the book is that Luther can only be understood in light of the late-medieval worldview that (among other things) took the insidious (and tangible) machinations of the Devil seriously. For Luther, Oberman argues, the Devil was a constant adversary, and Luther detected his influence in nearly every facet of life - from the great to the mundane. It is this late-medieval worldview that provides the crucial background information for properly understanding the complex persona of Martin Luther the monk, professor, reformer, husband, and father. The book begins by outlining the political and religious environment that preceded the decisive break between Luther and Rome. Politically, there was growing resentment by the German princes (and populace) toward what was perceived as Roman arrogance and world-hegemony. This antagonism towards Rome, coupled with an increasing

nationalistic-patriotic fervor among Germans is especially evident in Luther's political manifesto, *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, published in 1520.

Oberman, Heiko A., *Luther, Man between God and the Devil*, Translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989) Paperback edition published 2006. This is the third biography I have read of Luther, and it may be the best single volume 'intellectual' biography, which deals a bit more with those currents which influenced his thought than some other volumes. In this regard, the closest comparison would be to *Martin Luther* by historian, novelist, and playwright Richard Marius. Both books virtually stop their story somewhere between 1525, the date of Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*, his most important theological work, and 1530, the date of the Marburg Colloquy, shortly before the death of Ulrich Zwingli. Oberman does carry on to touch the highlights of Luther's married life with Magdalena Luther. He even dedicates some time to Luther's frequent bouts of bad health, starting around 1518. This included the tragicomic incident where Luther felt he was on death's door, in 1537, due to a kidney stone, which prohibited him from passing water. Philipp Melanchthon, based on some astrological determination, suggested that he postpone a coach ride back to Electoral Saxony, his 'motherland', for one day, since it was at the new moon. The bumpy carriage ride dislodged the stone, which passed. Then, Luther 'almost drowned in his own water'. Oberman, like Marius, is very light on the political events in Luther's life. It does cover the desire for independence of the north German estates from Roman canon law and the Pope, which contributed to Luther's safety in the early years of his excommunication and ban. For a more complete, albeit a bit less deep picture of Luther's whole life, the standard source is Roland Bainton's *Here I Stand*, first published in 1950.

The *New Yorker* calls this book a "Remarkable Study" Okay, so this is the first biography of Luther that I have ever read. My previous knowledge of who was the "great Reformer" is from movies, religious literature quotes, preachers talking about church history and Reformation - a very limited view on the complexity of the Martin Luther's persona. The image on the cover is of Luther as Junker J  rg, Martin's moniker while hiding in the Wartburg castle after the papal excommunication. For anyone interested in seriously getting a good-enough grasp of who Martin Luther was and the times he lived in, look no further. Oberman's expectation of his work has had its effect on me - I am more interested in reading Martin Luther's original works. The reason why I selected this to be my first biography on Luther is for a couple of reasons: 1) it is a book used by some Lutheran seminaries, 2) the author has used original sources and also German scholarly

works for his research (his chapter notes alone span 23 pages)<sup>3</sup>) wrote and published the first printing in German, and<sup>4</sup>) the author has been true to his mission stated in the preface to "grasp the main in his totality - with head 'and' heart." My impression, as I was slowly making my way through the book (underlining and writing notes), is that the author really understands the times in which Luther lived. I really felt that the author took me back to the early 1500's, central medieval Europe (aka Holy Roman Empire). Thus this book is not about exploring the "Catholic" or "Protestant," or even the "modern" Luther (although they are encountered in the book) but understanding Martin Luther as the man between God and the Devil.

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