

THE APOCALYPTIC LUTHER: HIS NOAHIC SELF-UNDERSTANDING

MICHAEL PARSONS*

I. INTRODUCTION

In defining apocalypticism in the period of the European reformations R. B. Barnes suggests that its main element, its most salient feature, is the expectancy of the imminent end of history. On the basis of that teaching apocalypticism seeks to offer insight into “the crucial role of the present in a cosmic struggle.”¹ He suggests also that apocalyptic thinking is prophetic. It is so because “it undertakes to warn evildoers and to console the righteous, and it seeks definite insight into God’s plan for the world.”² And of course, in a sense, this has to be true of such an eschatological framework of thought. In many ways, apocalypticism becomes prophetic as a necessary corollary to its own belief in the imminence of the end time, it is that which gives its urgency and which impels its search for divine perspective. Similarly, Heiko Oberman singles out three elements of the traditional apocalypticism of the period, namely, the belief in the approaching end time, the struggle between God and the devil, and the appearance of antichrist.³

Society at the time of the Reformation was permeated by fervent apocalyptic ideas and expectation, as was the Medieval period previously. This is well documented.⁴ Robert Kolb expresses it as follows: “Luther’s was an age of urgent and ardent expectations. Humanists longed for the restoration of good learning—and thus for societal order and wellbeing. Exhibiting various degrees of apocalyptic dreaming, the common people yearned for a new age. A crisis of pastoral care also gripped Western Christendom, and many

* Michael Parsons is lecturer in systematic theology at Murdoch University and the Baptist Theological College, 20 Hayman Rd., Bentley, Perth, Western Australia 6102.

¹ R. B. Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988) 18. See also pp. 19–30. Apocalypticism is a complex phenomenon and anything said in this short essay, of necessity, is simplified in order to facilitate study.

² R. B. Barnes, “Apocalypticism,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (ed. H. J. Hilberbrand; New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 1.63.

³ H. Oberman, “Teufelsdreck: Eschatology and Scatology in the Old Luther,” in *The Impact of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994) 57.

⁴ See, for example, Barnes, “Apocalypticism” 63–68; H. Preuss, *Die Vorstellungen vom Antichrist im späten Mittelalter, bei Luther und in der konfessionellen Polemik* (Leipzig: C. J. Hinrichsches Buchhandlung, 1906); P. Zambelli, “Astrologi hallucinati”: *Stars and the End of the World in Luther’s Time* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1983); A. Bradstock, *Faith in the Revolution* (London: SPCK, 1997).

were listening and looking for God's direct intervention in their lives."⁵ This, in itself, underscores an interesting conjunction between apocalypticism and pastoral crisis, a conjunction noted below from Luther's writing. Kolb speaks further in the same context of the "deeply felt hopes of peasants and humanists alike" and of "the apocalyptic restlessness of the late Middle Ages."⁶

There seems to be no argument concerning apocalypticism in general terms. However, when we specify Martin Luther's theology within these more general parameters, the question of the reformer's apocalypticism becomes a moot one. Clearly, he is an apocalyptic thinker, but with how much significance should this be endowed? Are Luther's apocalyptic ideas merely a superficial acceptance and continuance of current and popular thought or are they part and parcel of his own contribution? Is it the case that Luther becomes more apocalyptic during the course of his (largely frustrated) career to reform the church or can we say that the "old Luther" intensifies the substance of what was there in the first place, the apocalypticism of his earlier years? These are matters that continue to arouse discussion among Reformation scholars.

The modest purpose of this short essay is twofold. First, it surveys and analyzes some of the recent comment on the subject, drawing conclusions where possible through a reading of Luther's work. Because of both the size and the nature of the corpus this process will be necessarily somewhat superficial. The second purpose is to present a close and detailed examination of Luther's treatment of Genesis 6–9 (the Noahic narrative) in order to summarize the reformer's self-understanding as an end-time, apocalyptic reformer. This will reinforce the conclusions already reached. On the basis of the foregoing, the essay offers some reflections on the nature of Luther's self-understanding.

II. APOCALYPTICISM IN LUTHER'S THEOLOGY

The question of Luther's apocalypticism tends to divide scholars' opinions into two broad responses. Some would advocate that, though showing apocalyptic tendencies in his theological work, the reformer's thought is not essentially apocalyptic. Conversely, others would argue that an understanding of Luther's apocalypticism is vital for an understanding of his thought. This second general response is not entirely uniform in itself, of course, in that some argue that apocalypticism is significant only toward the end of Luther's career, while others see it as prominent throughout. We turn briefly to outline these responses.

Bernard Lohse is a key example of the first response, which contends that apocalypticism is not essential to Luther's theology. Though he recognizes its presence, Lohse has consistently maintained that apocalyptic

⁵ R. Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher and Hero* (Carlisle: Paternoster/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1999) 17–18.

⁶ *Ibid.* 26, 28 respectively.

thought in Luther is not significant. The recent publication of the English translation of his major work, *Luthers Theologie*, adds to that impression.⁷ In it Lohse suggests that the reformer did nothing more than appropriate “something of the views then dominant about death and judgment, about the antichrist and end time expectation.”⁸ He believes that his examination of Luther’s developing theology forces him to posit “an apocalyptic cast,”⁹ but not necessarily an apocalyptic heart to that theology. In other words, he seems to admit to a rather superficial use of end-time theological motifs, but he refuses to speak of Luther being driven or of his theology being shaped by apocalypticism. For Lohse, there seems to be counter-evidence that overrules such a possibility. Two such things, for example, are that Luther reckoned on a longer historical development and the fact that he resisted predicting the end.¹⁰ Others support Lohse’s position, most notably perhaps B. Moeller, who emphasizes that apocalyptic thought was so commonplace among the early reformers that it should not be singled out as a significant characteristic of Luther’s theology.¹¹

The second response is to say that apocalypticism is essential to Luther’s thinking. It is probably true to say that this presently characterizes the general scholarly consensus on the subject.¹² However, as we have seen, there is discussion on whether it is something that develops in the reformer’s thought or whether it is consistently present throughout his career.

Of those who argue the former, E. W. Gritsch speaks of Luther being “increasingly convinced” of apocalypticism and, particularly, of the imminence of the world’s end.¹³ Mark Edwards concurs on the basic thesis. He certainly reads Luther’s work as having apocalyptic dimensions.¹⁴ He agrees that the reformer held that the end time was at hand, that Luther saw events in his own day as somehow fulfilling predictions from the prophecies of Daniel and

⁷ The full title is *Luthers Theologie in ihrer historischen Entwicklung und in ihrem systematischen Zusammenhang* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995); ET *Martin Luther’s Theology. Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999). See also idem, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to his Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 89, 195.

⁸ *Martin Luther’s Theology* 325–26.

⁹ *Ibid.* 334.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 333. Lohse supports the first point by reference to Luther’s letter to Duke George of Saxony, May 16 (1519) WA Br. 1.177, 21–22.

¹¹ B. Moeller, “Was wurde in der Frühzeit der Reformation in den deutschen Städten gepredigt?” *ARG* 75 (1984) 176–93 (cited by Oberman, “Teufelsdröck” 57).

¹² Barnes, “Apocalypticism” 65, says, “Among the major reformers, Luther showed the most pronounced apocalyptic tendencies.” See also G. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 78–161; P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 161–68; U. Asendorf, *Eschatologie bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967); E. W. Gritsch, “The Cultural Context of Luther’s Interpretation,” *Int* 37 (1983) 274–75; T. F. Torrance, “The Eschatology of Faith: Martin Luther,” in *Luther: Theologian for Catholics and Protestants* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985) 145–213; Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis* 4; S. H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in the Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 150–52; idem, “Re-rooting the Faith: The Reformation as Re-Christianization,” *CH* 69 (2000) 558–77; Kolb, *Martin Luther* 180.

¹³ E. W. Gritsch, *Martin—God’s Court Jester* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 39, 127–28.

¹⁴ M. U. Edwards, *Luther’s Last Battles: Politics and Polemics 1531–46* (Leiden: Brill, 1983) 33–34, 46–57, 156–59, 203–6 and, particularly, 97–114.

the Apocalypse.¹⁵ Edwards also emphasizes the older Luther in this context. He says, for example, "This apocalyptic vision plays a major role in many of the polemics of the older Luther." And again, "The older Luther was a man who saw the world engaged in a metaphysical struggle between good and evil. He was a man gripped by apocalyptic hopes and fears."¹⁶ It appears by this that Edwards maintains a later significance for apocalypticism in Luther's theology, a significance absent in his earlier writing. Edwards bases this interpretation on a number of observations, including Luther's disappointment over the reception of the gospel in Germany, increasing concern over indifference and wickedness, the rise of sects and heresies, and the identification of the Turks as the beast of the Book of Revelation. All these seemed to indicate to the older Luther that the day of judgment and redemption was imminent, that history had all but run its course.¹⁷

Heiko Oberman has also consistently and cogently argued that Luther was essentially apocalyptic in his theological outlook.¹⁸ Interestingly, he has always vigorously defended an opposing view from that of Edwards, that is, that Luther's theology was continuously apocalyptic in nature—even from the very beginning of his ministry. Oberman says, "It is not just the *Old Luther* who sees the world coming to an end; already the young Luther has seen that the world has *grown old*."¹⁹ Oberman believes that there is ample evidence in Luther's corpus to illustrate that arguments purporting to show that Luther only gradually became apocalyptic following his struggle and disappointment are entirely fallacious. He says, perceptively, "The so-called 'disappointment' of Luther is not a reaction to the historically *perceived* impact, but part and parcel of Luther's understanding of the *expected* impact of the gospel." He then quotes a letter, written to Riga in 1524, which says, "After all, it is not to be expected that either with us or with you the gospel, which now shines anew, will fare any better than it did at the time of Christ and the apostles, or, for that matter, since the beginning of the world."²⁰ Oberman states that "we will fail to grasp his [Luther's] self-understanding" unless we see him as beginning his public ministry as "the apocalyptic prophet at the end of time." He continues by saying that Luther sees himself from the beginning as "the forerunner and the prophet, who in the short interim left before the final intervention of Christ raises his voice to call for the Day of the Lord and erects the shield of the gospel to buy time for conversion."²¹ Perhaps, what changes and in-

¹⁵ Ibid. 97. Edwards cites Luther's forward to the Book of Daniel, WA 11/2:2–48, 124–30.

¹⁶ Ibid. 97, 208 respectively.

¹⁷ Ibid. 97, 103, 113–14. It should be noted that Edwards is careful to say that it was not simply the disgruntled aging process that caused Luther's views to develop but rather the increasing experience of the Reformer and his interpretation of events and Scripture.

¹⁸ Together with Oberman's essay, "Teufelsdreck," in *The Impact of the Reformation* 51–68, referenced in footnote 3 above; see in the same volume, "The Impact of the Reformation: Problems and Perspectives" 194–98. Also idem, *Forerunners of the Reformation* (London: Lutterworth, 1967) 13; *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (London: Fontana, 1993) esp. 43–44, 67–80, 297.

¹⁹ "Teufelsdreck" 68 (original emphasis).

²⁰ Ibid. 63. Luther's comment is taken from WA 15.360. See also WA 15.362.

²¹ Ibid. 64–65.

creases is not so much the reformer's perception of the apocalyptic situation, but, as he sees it, it is the power struggle itself that seems to intensify.

Two other writers who are equally adamant about the same thesis are John Tonkin and, more recently, James Nestingen. Decades ago, the former argued the same point very strongly indeed. In an early essay Tonkin says, "It is no exaggeration to say that Luther lived his whole life with a vivid consciousness of the last day and interpreted events of his time as signs of its imminence."²² Interestingly, as does Oberman, he also argues that Luther's apocalyptic expectation was not something that developed because of despair or failure in the later years (that is in the "older" Luther), but "was present with him from the beginning, even in his moments of greatest triumph and achievement."²³

In a recent, incisive essay James Nestingen has argued in a similar vein. Generally speaking, he agrees with Oberman's view. Yet according to Nestingen, not only was Luther's theology apocalyptic in its nature and dominant subject areas, but also "[t]his apocalypticism was the controlling factor in Luther's response to the challenges of his day." Later, he writes that Luther's theology was "apocalyptically driven."²⁴ His fuller comment bears quoting at length: "[Luther] was an apocalypticist. He was such, not on the order of what we find in Daniel, Mark 13, or Revelation, though he did write on Daniel and attempted to decipher timetables. Instead, Luther was an apocalypticist on the order of Isaiah, looking forward to the day of the Lord with keen anticipation and working out his theological reflections in that light."²⁵ According to Nestingen's analysis, Luther saw that the fundamental challenge of the Reformation was that the conscience had been terrified by the law which, in itself, was bolstered by the church's authority (epitomized by the papacy) and ecclesiastical practice.²⁶ On the other hand, Luther's response to that challenge was to read the situation apocalyptically. He understood events and institutions eschatologically. The papacy in this context, for example, is antichrist, the evil antagonist is Satan, history is approaching its end, God must soon act to bring to completion that which he has begun in Christ.²⁷

One would have to argue, however, that in reality the circumstance of Luther's apocalyptic theology was somewhat more circular than this might

²² J. M. Tonkin, "Luther's Interpretation of Secular Reality," *JRH* 6 (1970) 136–37. See pp. 133–50.

²³ *Ibid.* 138. In *The Church and the Secular Order in Reformation Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971) 46, Tonkin suggests that there were two opposite impulses to be discerned in Luther's theology at this point: apocalypticism and secularity. "On the one hand he anticipates the swift and immediate disintegration of the secular order, and on the other hand he affirms it as God's creation and the sphere of man's vocation."

²⁴ J. A. Nestingen, "Challenges and Responses in the Reformation," *Int* 46 (1992) 257, 258 respectively.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 256. See also Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis* 38; D. R. Reid, "Luther, Müntzer, and the Last Day: Eschatological Hope, Apocalyptic Expectations," *MQR* 69 (1995) 53–74.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 251 (but see the whole article, pp. 250–60). Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology* 333, concedes that what allowed Luther to expect the imminence of the world's end was "chiefly the rule of the pope." According to Luther, the pope claimed to be above the Word of God.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 257. See also Oberman, *Forerunners* 13.

imply. It is quite true, as Nestingen suggests, that the concrete situation or challenge (as he puts it) impels Luther to read the events apocalyptically. That is, as Eric Gritsch puts it, "Luther was a contextual . . . theologian." Again, "*Anfechtungen* over Satan, the Pope, *Schwärmer*, Turks, Jews, pestilence, and personal diseases, prompted him to view his own age as the end time."²⁸ On the other hand, though, the reformer's eschatological framework seems to convince him of the situation he finds himself in historically. The important point is that, whether the situation calls forth the apocalypticism (strictly speaking) or the apocalypticism triggers the interpretation (and it seems likely that both directions of apprehension occur simultaneously), we are able to say that apocalypticism in Luther is significant for his theology. It is both a crucial part of the impulse of that theology and a vital element in its goal.

In his comments on Genesis 34 (1542) the reformer speaks of the "extreme old age of the world" and two years later, in a personal letter to James Propst, he likens the world's progress to his own. Of himself, he says, "I am sluggish, tired, cold—that is, I am an old and useless man." He continues in typically expressive language, "It looks to me as if the world, too, has come to the hour of its passing and has become an old wornout coat which soon has to be changed."²⁹ It appears from these quotations that Luther's apocalyptic thought was inextricably tied to his own deterioration in age. It would have to be said that that would be an oversimplification, as we have briefly observed above. However, it is true that with age Luther became increasingly concerned about this aspect of reality as he saw it. That is natural enough. But we should notice that his apocalypticism pervades the whole of his reforming career.

As early as 1519, in a letter to George Spalatin, Luther points to the pope as antichrist and gives the reason that the papacy had corrupted the truth.³⁰ Three years later the reformer defines both his reformation and his personal struggle in apocalyptic terms. For instance, he writes to John von Staupitz, "I am daily challenging Satan and his armor all the more . . . so that the day of Christ may be hastened in which he will destroy the antichrist."³¹ Notice, the antichrist is significant in Luther's thinking, but it is

²⁸ Gritsch, "The Cultural Context of Luther's Interpretation" 266, 274 respectively. Reid suggests that the eschatological framework convinced the reformer that a great deal was at stake in his struggle, that time was certainly short, and that "God's triumph could be achieved only as his faithful servants played their part" ("Luther, Müntzer and the Last Day" 74). Also, J. McNutt, "Martin Luther as Human Being: Reflections from a Distance," *Churchman* 108 (1994) 265–70, particularly 267; M. Schild, "On Luther's Understanding of the Word and History," *The Reformed Theological Review* 28 (1969) 90–99.

²⁹ *Comm Gen* 34:1–2, LW 6.188 [WA 44.140]; to James Propst, Wittenberg, Dec 5, 1544, LW 20.245 [WA Br.10.554]. See also, to King Christian of Denmark, Wittenberg, April 14, 1545, LW 50.251 [WA Br.11.70]; to Wenceslas Link, Wittenberg, June 20, 1543, LW 50.242 [WA Br.10.548].

³⁰ To George Spalatin, Wittenberg, March 1519, LW 48.111–15 [WA Br.1.359–60]. Notice his characteristically derisive comments in a letter to Philip Melancthon, Wartburg, May 12, 1521, LW 48.215–17 [WA Br.2.332–33], "What a horrible picture of God's wrath is that detestable kingdom of the Roman Antichrist! . . . O kingdom of the pope, worthy of the end and dregs of the ages!" See Reid, "Luther, Müntzer, and the Last Day" 58–60.

³¹ To John von Staupitz, Wittenberg, June 27, 1522, LW 49.13 [WA Br.2.568].

ultimately the devil himself who causes the conflict. This perspective is apparent throughout his career, all the way to his mature commentary on Gen 49:16–18 (written in 1545), for example.³²

The presence of the antichrist was to precede and to hasten the Last Day. Of that, Luther showed little doubt over his career. In his commentary on 2 Peter (1523) he speaks of the Last Day being “at the door.” He continues, “He (that is, Christ) will appear swiftly, unexpectedly, and suddenly.”³³ Earlier in his ministry the reformer spells this out just as clearly, “Such evil was bound to arise now at the end of the world; for the world, weighed down with God’s wrath on account of its sins, which have taken the upper hand, has inclined itself toward hell and its damnation.”³⁴ The present deteriorating state of the world confirms to Luther that the end is near.³⁵ In 1535 he writes, “The period when the Gospel first became known among us was rather respectable. Now there is almost no fear of God, our shortcomings grow daily, and false prophets are even making their appearance. . . . The more closely the world approaches its end, the more it is overwhelmed by penalties and catastrophes . . . And yet we look at all these things with a smug and unconcerned attitude.”³⁶ The “penalties and catastrophes” of which Luther speaks are directly related to the wrath of God appearing before the end of the world, but somehow ushering in that ultimate divine judgment to come.

In this Luther discerns a pattern. In some ways discerning universally applicable patterns is itself a characteristic of apocalyptic thinking, of course. First, the world grows in its contempt of the Word. Though God (in love) sends those who will preach and plead with them, men and women remain impenitent. More than that, they were hardened in their sin and unconcerned—Luther’s oft-employed word *securitate*, translated “smug” in the American edition. This smugness was expected. The reformer sees this pattern repeating itself throughout Scripture: in Noah’s day with Israel even though they were in covenant with God; with the Jews of Jesus’ day; and through history up to and including the current period of Reformation.³⁷

This situation, which Luther sees all too clearly around him, calls for pastoral preaching. Apocalypticism in Luther’s theology is never merely an interest in “last things,” however imminent they appear. Its impulse is towards pastoral urgency. The task is twofold: to rebuke immoral behavior and to encourage towards godliness in every area of life.³⁸ Commenting on

³² *Comm Gen* 49:16–18, LW 8.283 [WA 44.786–87]. See also, *Avoiding the Doctrines of Men* (1522), LW 35.136–40 [WA 10².77–80]; April 11, 1539, LW 54.346 [WA Tr.4.339]; LW 54.101 [WA Tr.1.262–64].

³³ *Comm 2 Pet* 3:3, LW 30.193 [WA 14.66].

³⁴ *The Misuse of the Mass* (1521; published 1522), LW 36.225 [WA 8.559]. See also Luther’s letter to Wenceslas Link, Wittenberg, June 20, 1543, LW 50.241–44 [WA Br.10.335].

³⁵ See *Comm Gen* 3:17–19, LW 1.206 [WA 42.154]; Luther says that the “The world is deteriorating from day to day” (*Mundus enim de die in diem magis degenerat*).

³⁶ *Comm Gen* 3:17–19, LW 1.206, 208 [WA 42.154, 156] respectively.

³⁷ See LW 54.440–41 [WA Tr.5.205]; *Comm Gen* 9:26, LW 2.175 [WA 42.385]; *Comm 2 Pet* 3:3, LW 30.192–93 [WA 14.66–67]. See Edwards, *Luther and the False Brethren*, particularly 181–83.

³⁸ See, for example, the preface to *Comm Hab*, LW 19.153 [WA 13.351]; *Comm Isa* 9:8, LW 16.102 [WA 31².72].

2 Pet 3:11–12, Luther makes this significant remark, “Since you know that everything must pass away, both heaven and earth, consider how completely you must be prepared with a saintly and godly life and conduct to meet this Day. Thus St. Peter describes this Day as imminent, in order that they may be ready for it, hope for it with joy, and hasten to meet it as the Day which delivers us from sin, death, and hell.”³⁹

The pastoral intent sometimes has the effect of localizing Luther’s thinking. The universal apocalyptic scheme envisaged is often focused on the more immediate. Thus in his *Letter of Consolation to all who Suffer Persecution* (1522), the reformer fears that the German nation will “receive its just deserts in the end. . . . The nation is tempting God too often,” he writes.⁴⁰ Luther’s acceptance of some natural events that he saw as signs or portents of Christ’s return and the end of history show this provincial aspect most clearly. These would include, for example, certain rumored apparitions in 1529, a solar eclipse, followed by a heat wave as late as 1540.⁴¹ Notice how in a few sentences the reformer shifts focus from cosmic perspective to a narrow, limited example, each supporting the other: “The last day is at hand. My calendar has run out. I know nothing more in my Scriptures. All the firmaments and the course of the heavens are slowing down and approaching the end. For a whole year the Elbe has remained at the same level, and this, too, is a portent.”⁴²

Despite Lohse’s reservations, then, it is clear that Luther’s apocalyptic thought is not only consistently present in his theology, but also significant.⁴³ He holds a genuinely apocalyptic view of history that gives him the sense of living and ministering at the end of time.⁴⁴ As we have noted, this apocalypticism works in two opposite directions. He reads and interprets the current situation (“challenge” in Nestingen’s term) as foundationally apocalyptic: the conflict he faces is between God and the devil, the moral

³⁹ *Comm 2 Pet* (1523) 3:11–12, LW 30.197 [WA 14.71].

⁴⁰ LW 43.69 [WA 10².59].

⁴¹ To Wenceslas Link, Wittenberg, March 7, 1529, LW 49.216 [WA Br.5.28]; to Mrs. M. Luther, Eisenbach, July 16, 1540, LW 50.218–20 [WA Br.9.174–75]. H. H. Kramm mentions that when astronomers predicted a great flood in 1524, Luther hoped that it would signify the Last Day (*The Theology of Martin Luther* [London: James Clarke, 1947] 103), and Torrance suggests that Luther worked hurriedly in 1530 in case the end was imminent (“The Eschatology of Faith” 155). See also *Comm Gen* 6:1–2, LW 2.13 [WA 42.271].

⁴² January 1, 1532, LW 54.134 [WA Tr.2.33].

⁴³ That is not to say that there is no ambiguity in Luther’s thinking. There quite clearly is. Two specific difficulties could be mentioned. At times Luther’s idea of what “imminent” means is not confined to the traditional or popular understanding. For example, in *Comm 1 John* 2:18, LW 30.251 [WA 20.667], he argues that imminence is related, not to shortness of time, but rather because there is no new teaching to be received before the end. At another time, *Comm Hos* 12:9, LW 18.67 [WA 33.424], he says, “We always consider the Last Day as if it were present. . . . This is the way the prophets considered the incarnation of Christ.” These comments must be acknowledged, but they are exceptional (rather than normative) in his corpus.

⁴⁴ Luther’s apocalyptic understanding and concern is largely absent from Calvin’s theology, of course. Calvin, a second-generation reformer, was too caught up in Erasmanian humanism and in the programmatic reform of the Church to see things as Luther had. See Barnes, “Apocalypticism” 65; Nestingen, “Challenges and Responses” 255–58; M. Engammare, “Calvin: A Prophet without a Prophecy,” *CH* 67 (1998) 643–61; T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992) 1–16; B. Cottret, *Calvin. A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 318.

conduct of society is necessarily declining, antichrist has appeared, and the Last Day is imminent and approaching at speed. So, in one sense his focal direction is from what is happening around him to his eschatological understanding and scheme of things. But inevitably, Luther also moves from that scheme to the concrete situation with pastoral concern and a sense of real urgency and hope.⁴⁵

III. LUTHER'S APOCALYPTIC READING OF THE NOAHIC NARRATIVE

Having reflected on Luther's significant belief in and use of apocalypticism, the present essay now turns to examine the reformer's commentary on Genesis 6–9, the Noahic narrative (specifically, the story of the flood). From the general context of scholarly debate and the conclusions drawn regarding Luther's understanding of the apocalyptic nature of the time in which he lived, we now focus on what Luther saw as his own specific role within that time. Many of the important points of Luther's apocalyptic vision are stressed and underlined in these pages of his mature commentary.

It is interesting that several Luther scholars write on the subject of Luther's apocalypticism, but only one directly mentions his interest in Noah within that context. Eric Gritsch says that, "Although Luther's friends often thought of him as the reincarnated Elijah, Luther liked to see himself as Noah. Like Noah, he thought he stood alone against an ungrateful, licentious world . . . The world began to look to him like the world before the flood."⁴⁶ In this Gritsch rightly positions Luther in apocalyptic thought and attitude. He also states that the reformer parallels himself with Noah. To this we now briefly turn. What we find is that by positing Noah as his OT equivalent, Luther largely defines his own role within the Reformation as apocalyptic and, more specifically, as an end time prophet of God. And so, though in general, it is right to suggest that Luther saw his task as re-rooting the faith (to use Hendrix's phrase⁴⁷), specifically, within the contextual parameters pursued by this essay, we see that Luther recognized himself as a somewhat unwilling spokesman, speaking God's Word in the last days.

As he approaches the flood narrative, it seems appropriate to Luther to interpret it in terms relevant to his own day. The parallelism that he sees between Noah's story and that of the Reformation period is so close that at times it becomes difficult for readers to disentangle between the two in the Reformer's interpretation.⁴⁸ Interestingly, this parallelism and the apocalyptic identification is unabated in his comments on chapter 6 (the call of

⁴⁵ This is partly worked out in my forthcoming book, *Reformation Marriage. The Husband and Wife Relationship in Luther and Calvin* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House) ch. 5.

⁴⁶ Gritsch, "The Cultural Context of Luther's Interpretation" 276.

⁴⁷ Hendrix, "Re-rooting the Faith" 558–77. See also, for example, D. Streater, "Renaissance and Reformation," *Churchman* 107 (1993) 294–306; P. Matheson, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000) 119–40.

⁴⁸ This corresponds to Luther's understanding of the "historical" sense of biblical narrative. David Steinmetz points out that by "history" Luther means "something like the plain narrative, theologically understood and interpreted" ("Luther and the Drunkenness of Noah," in *Luther in Context* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986] 108). At Gen 7:2, for instance, Luther speaks of it as this historical account relating two interpreted facts: "just as God's wrath is unbearable

Noah, the flood and the destruction of the world). But chs. 7–9 (Noah's rescue and subsequent worship of God) have little, if anything of a similar nature. It is almost as if Luther drains the apocalyptic imagery and application out of the early chapter, simply because the passage is more clearly negative—after all, it focuses on the contrast between righteous Noah, the surrounding godless world, and its threat of destruction by God.

The approach of the remainder of the study will be to look at three aspects of Luther's teaching: (1) the Reformer's perception of the condition of the world (that is, both Noah's and his own); (2) the parallelism envisaged between Noah and the Reformer; and (3) the apocalyptic pattern that Luther sees as formerly established in the flood narrative and now informative to his own day and calling.

1. *The condition of the world.* As Luther expounds the passage on the flood that overcame Noah's day as divine judgment, it is clear that the question he wishes to underline is, "Why was there a flood?" or, more pointedly, "Who was responsible for it?" As he relates the answer to his own day, he sees a striking similarity. And there is that same underlying and nagging question of responsibility.

On the general state of the world he says, "[I]t is clear that the smugness of the first world was exceedingly great. . . . it stubbornly persisted in its lusts and even laughed at . . . the herald of righteousness, Noah. . . . Today, when the day of the Lord is drawing near, the situation is almost the same."⁴⁹ He later speaks of "excessive and unheard-of wickedness" by which society is afflicted and of "unbelief, smugness, disregard of the Word, and ungodly thoughts."⁵⁰ Perhaps one can see the perceived parallel to the Reformer's own day in Luther's more detailed application: "through their passionate lust they disorganized both the home and the state, and . . . the church as well. Therefore the sin of the original world was the disorganization of all classes of men. The church was undermined by the idolatrous and ungodly forms of worship as well as by the tyrants who cruelly persecuted the godly teachers and holy men."⁵¹ Noah's day? Or Reformation Europe? Luther seems to be speaking of one but thinking of the other. He clearly sees one almost literally mirrored in the other. He is able to do this, because he feels that he knows (understands) the former time on the basis that he lives in its exact parallel.

Two important points might be drawn from the quoted passage. The first is the significance of the church's apostasy, to which we return below. The second is the obvious idea that the flood is directly one of the consequences

when he has begun to be incensed, so his compassion is boundless and without measure after it begins to shine again"; *Comm Gen* 7:2, LW 2.134 [WA 42.356]. See also M. Ellingsen, "Luther as Narrative Exegete," *JR* 63 (1983) 394–413, who cites Luther's *First Lectures on Psalms* (1513–15) LW 11.497 [WA 4.365–66] and LW 35.170 [WA 16.385–86].

⁴⁹ *Comm Gen* 6:3, LW 2.24 [WA 42.278]. See also, *Comm Gen* 3:17–19, LW 1.206 [WA 42.153–54].

⁵⁰ *Comms Gen* 6:12, LW 2.62 [WA 42.305]; 8:21, LW 2.119 [WA 42.346], respectively.

⁵¹ *Comm Gen* 6:3, LW 2.32 [WA 42.284].

of sin. Luther speaks of the potential of original sin in this scenario.⁵² He also underlines something of the inevitability of the world's worsening condition. "Therefore we may assume that the closer the world was to Adam's Fall, the better it was; but it has deteriorated from day to day until our times, in which live the dregs and, as it were, the ultimate dung of the human race."⁵³ In this, the world hastens to its own destruction, just as Noah's world had done. It has willfully despised God and disregarded both the first and the second tables of divine law. The Reformer insists that it is simply a matter of time between abandoning the former laws related more directly to God and true worship and a total setting aside or violating of the laws more concerned with societal peace and order.⁵⁴

To a point the first impression is that Luther is speaking primarily of the godless world of Noah's and his own day, that is, those who know nothing of God's Word and his grace. However, that would be quite wrong. At least it would be a superficial reading. Significantly, the reformer stresses the fact that during both periods God's anger is specifically focused on those who have been God's people, but who are now going their own way. He states this categorically, saying that the flood came, not because of the evil of the unrighteous, but because the righteous "who had believed God, obeyed his Word, and observed true worship" had fallen into sin. He makes the contemporary application just as strongly. He says, "Similarly, the coming of the Last Day will be hastened, not because of the heathen, the Turks, and the Jews are ungodly, but because through the pope and the fanatics the church itself has become filled with error and because even those who occupy the leading positions in the church are licentious, lustful, and tyrannical."⁵⁵ He argues this from Scripture on the basis of the phrase "the sons of God" in Gen 6:2. It is those described by that term with whom the Lord will not contend forever, according to Luther.⁵⁶ They will not escape punishment simply because of their title, neither will the "church" of his own day.⁵⁷

Luther's criticism of the Catholic Church of his day stems, in part, from his understanding and interpretation of what was happening in Noah's day. Accordingly, he sees the underlying or foundational attitude of the church to be that of false presumption. Luther believes that what he sees as contemporary "smugness" or assurance both originates from and is bolstered by a false understanding of Matt 16:18 and other passages that seem to offer confidence.⁵⁸ The pope and his church simply believe that it is impossible to

⁵² See *Comms Gen* 6:1, LW 2.5 [WA 42.266]; 8:21, LW 2.119 [WA 42.346]. See also *Comm Gen* 6:9–10, LW 2.58 [WA 42.302].

⁵³ *Comm Gen* 6:1, LW 2.7 [WA 42.266]. See also *Comms Gen* 6:1, LW 2.12 [WA 42.270]; 6:3, LW 2.16 [WA 42.273].

⁵⁴ *Comms Gen* 6:1, LW 2.6 [WA 42.266]; LW 2.9 [WA 42.268]; 6:3, LW 2.30 [WA 42.283]; 7:1, LW 2.87 [WA 42.323].

⁵⁵ *Comm Gen* 6:1, LW 2.12 [WA 42.270].

⁵⁶ Luther asks, "Is it not the very 'sons of God' whom God threatens here, saying He no longer wants to judge them by his Spirit?" (*Comm Gen* 6:3, LW 2.20 [WA 42.276]).

⁵⁷ *Comm Gen* 6:3, LW 2.22 [WA 42.277].

⁵⁸ Matt 16:18 says, "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." Other passages cited in a similar context are Luke 22:32

perish: they are the “church,” the people of God, divinely gifted and unerring. According to the Reformer, they boast in such empty things as titles, prestige, large numbers, power, and apostolic succession.⁵⁹ In short, they form a church of their own imagining.⁶⁰

Luther’s criticism is at times incisive and hard-hitting. He complains that the church practices only a false piety, it embellishes worship, it condemns the truth, it persecutes those who are “truly godly and do that in God’s name, in a pretense of justice. The pope and other church leaders are said to be blasphemers, those who suppress the church, who disparage the wisdom of God and belittle the tasks of the temporal kingdom—government, household, and the like. That which hastens the end time is the fact that these same people have a total disregard of divine threat, indeed they laugh at such a thought.”⁶¹ This, of course, is in direct contrast to what Luther would term “the true church.” The reformer compares them in the following way: “God will cast them aside for treading His Word underfoot and persecuting it; and He will choose for Himself another church which submits humbly to His Word and accepts the benefits of Christ with open arms.”⁶² It is little wonder, then, that Luther’s commentary on the Noahic narrative is littered with references to this other church as “opponents” and “adversaries.”⁶³ He sees them, not only as enemies of God, but of himself and his followers as upholders of divine truth. Though he concedes that there had once been grace in the church, they have fallen from it.⁶⁴ Despite all its pretentious assurance, the church is wrong.⁶⁵ Having stated that, however, Luther still maintains a gracious desire for them to turn to God and his Word: “Who would not prefer to have them receive the Word and come to their senses?”⁶⁶

Clearly, as Luther reads the situation, the church is responsible for its own punishment. But behind it all Luther cannot help but see the malevolent hand of the devil working against the grace of God. This is where the real conflict lies. The first mention of Satan sets the threatening tone and the apocalyptic context for other comments throughout this part of the com-

and John 14:18 (see *Comm Gen* 7:17–24, LW 2.99 [WA 42.332]). See also *Comm Gen* 19:14, LW 3.268 [WA 43.66–67].

⁵⁹ See the following: *Comms Gen* 6:3, LW 2.20, 21 [WA 42.276]; 6:6, LW 2.53 [WA 42.299]; 6:12, LW 2.62 [WA 42.305]; 6:13, LW 2.64 [WA 42.307]; 7:17–24, LW 2.100–102 [WA 42.333–34].

⁶⁰ Luther says, “The papists blatantly confront us with the name “church” and assure themselves of all the greatest successes, as though they could compel God to establish such a church as they themselves dream of and desire” (*Comm Gen* 7:17–24, LW 2.99 [WA 42.332]).

⁶¹ See the following: *Comms Gen* 6:6, LW 2.53 [WA 42.299]; 6:11, LW 2.59 [WA 42.303]; 6:12, LW 2.62 [WA 42.305]; 6:22, LW 2.79 [WA 42.318–19]; 7:17–24, LW 2.101 [WA 42.334]; they “hate the Word, distort God’s promises, and kill those who cling to the Word.”

⁶² *Comm Gen* 7:7–14, LW 2.100 [WA 42.333].

⁶³ See, for example, *Comms Gen* 6:12, LW 2.62 [WA 42.305]; 7:1, LW 2.84 [WA 42.321]; 7:17–24, LW 2.101 [WA 42.333].

⁶⁴ *Comm Gen* 6:18, LW 2.73 [WA 42.313].

⁶⁵ *Comm Gen* 6:13, LW 2.64 [WA 42.307].

⁶⁶ *Comm Gen* 6:3, LW 2.17 [WA 42.273]. Luther says that he is praying for the salvation of his opponents (see *Comm Gen* 6:6, LW 2.51 [WA 42.298]).

mentary. He writes, "The heathen who are without the Word, provide an example of the terrible darkness into which Satan can bring men when God remains silent and does not speak to them."⁶⁷ Significantly, it is not just unbelievers who are snared in that way; the church is caught in his trap, too. Luther insists, "The pope, the bishops, the doctors, the monks, and the priests all were the church of the malevolent in the pestilential chair, the true slaves of Satan who helped their father lie and murder."⁶⁸ And behind that again, God himself allows the prevalent attitude and sin to continue. The Holy Spirit departs, and judgment is close at hand.⁶⁹

In the face of such a situation, what was the "true" church to do? Luther answers, "What else can we do in these circumstances than cry to God that He hallow His name and not permit His kingdom to be destroyed and His fatherly will to be obstructed?"⁷⁰ This brings us to the reformer's self-understanding as an end time prophet, for faced with this cosmic conflict as it relates to the church he stands as a spokesman of God on the very edge of the age.⁷¹

2. *Luther sees himself as a Reformation Noah.* Given the apocalyptic interpretation that Luther has of the Noahic narrative and, as a parallel, of his own day, it is hardly surprising that he sees himself as a latter-day Noah. What is significant is the way that biblical reading impacts his self-understanding. In this section it is clear that Luther distinguishes between Noah and himself more clearly than he did in his comments on the two histories. Part of the reason for this is that, however much he sees himself in Noah and *vice versa*, the patriarch remains greater than the reformer.

Nevertheless, Luther's awareness of being the divine instrument, just as Noah had been, "gave him a new and decisive criterion for evaluating himself."⁷² We see this in the following quotation. Of Noah, Luther remarks, "To us today it seems impossible that one man should defy the entire world and condemn as evil all the rest, who glory in the church, the Word, and the worship of God, and that he should maintain that he alone is a son of God and acceptable to God. Noah, accordingly, is truly an amazing man." The reformer then turns that comment as a searchlight towards his own faithfulness.

⁶⁷ *Comm Gen* 6:3, LW 2.17 [WA 42.274]. On Luther's theology of Satan, see J. Burton Russell, *The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) 170–74.

⁶⁸ *Comm Gen* 6:3, LW 2.21 [WA 42.276]. See also, *Comms Gen* 6:3, LW 2.18–19 [WA 42.274–75]; 6:6, LW 2.52 [WA 42.299]; LW 2.53 [WA 42.299]; 7:17–24, LW 2.102 [WA 42.334].

⁶⁹ *Comms Gen* 6:3, LW 2.18–19, 21 [WA 42.275, 277]; 6:4, LW 2.38 [WA 42.288].

⁷⁰ *Comm Gen* 6:12, LW 2.62 [WA 42.305].

⁷¹ The last phrase is reminiscent of Torrance, "The Eschatology of Faith" 154–55. In Luther's commentary on Isaiah, he says, "Today, too, calamity threatens the world" (*Comm Isa* 58:13, LW 17.292 [WA 31².485]).

⁷² The thought, though in a different context, is from K. Holl, "Martin Luther on Luther," in *Interpreters of Luther* (ed. J. Pelikan; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 19. See also H. Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 69; Bornkamm cites *Tabletalk*, 5242 (1540), WA Tr.5.23–24.

If I had been aware that so many men in the generation of the wicked were opposing me, I surely would have given up the ministry in despair. No one believes how difficult it is for one man to oppose the common opinion of all the churches, to contend against the views of very good men and very good friends, to condemn them, and to teach, live, and do everything in opposition to them.

Luther again focuses on the patriarch, “Noah did this because he was gifted with marvelous steadfastness. Blameless as he was before men, he not only did not leave God’s business undone but carried it on courageously and with determination among the most wicked men.”⁷³

That passage is sufficient to show the way Luther rotates around comments on Noah and his own ministry. He certainly distinguishes them, but clearly there remains an equivalence that is not insignificant. Elsewhere, Luther says, “For the same things that happened to Noah happen to us.”⁷⁴ It seems clear that much of what he says of the patriarch has to be double-focused; though he refers to Noah, he implies himself as well.

The first comment that Luther makes of Noah is that he was a martyr. By that he seems to have meant one who witnesses to the faith in human weakness—though in the power of God—and one who necessarily suffers.⁷⁵ In other words Luther employs the term metaphorically. However, these characteristics inform his idea of his own ministry. Notice how these elements interrelate in the reformer’s comment, “Noah alone pitted himself against a world rushing to its destruction, in the hope that perhaps he could preserve righteousness and check unrighteousness,” but “the collapse and destruction of the church troubled and almost broke the heart of the righteous man.”⁷⁶

Noah was a man of God, filled by the Spirit of God.⁷⁷ By that Luther emphasizes vocation. He had been called by God, he had a divine compulsion to speak, and he was faithful to the one who had thus commissioned him. Above all, he had had to determine that he was right and that others were wrong and then keep faithful to that conviction.⁷⁸ Luther empathizes, commenting on the fact that it is very difficult and, indeed, painful, and that he himself had wrestled with the problem.⁷⁹ “Therefore,” he says, “we lament

⁷³ *Comm Gen* 6:9–10, LW 2.56 [WA 42.301]. Elsewhere, Luther speaks of Noah as, “One of the most outstanding heroes this world has ever produced” (*Comm Gen* 5:1, LW 1.334 [WA 42.246]).

⁷⁴ *Comm Gen* 6:5–6, LW 2.53 [WA 42.299]. Also, *Comm Gen* 7:1, LW 2.87 [WA 42.323–24].

⁷⁵ See R. Kolb, “God’s Gift of Martyrdom: The Early Reformation Understanding of Dying for the Faith,” *CH* 64 (1995) 399–411.

⁷⁶ *Comm Gen* 6:3, LW 2.28 [WA 42.281]. *Comm Gen* 6:4, LW 2.54 [WA 42.299], “It is unbelievable how much the contemplation of the wrath of God depresses the heart.” See also *Comm Gen* 6:6, LW 2.50–51 [WA 42.297–98]. On the suffering of innocent preachers (including Noah, Abraham and Christ), see *Comm John* 7:32–34, LW 23.260 [WA 33.413–14]. Luther then adds, “And we will not fare differently.”

⁷⁷ See *Comm Gen* 6:3, LW 2.22–23 [WA 42.277].

⁷⁸ On Noah’s faithfulness to his call, see, for example, *Comms Gen* 6:3, LW 2.13, 21 [WA 42.271, 277]; 6:9–10, LW 2.54 [WA 42.300]; 6:22, LW 2.77 [WA 42.317].

⁷⁹ *Comm Gen* 6:8, LW 2.55 [WA 42.300]. Part of the poignancy of the pain and difficulty is that Luther had been brought up in the Catholic Church. His was essentially an intra-Catholic debate, as David Steinmetz points out (“The Intellectual Appeal of the Reformation,” *TToday* 57 (2001) 459–72).

with Noah and commit our cause to the Lord.”⁸⁰ Later the Reformer seems to reassure himself and others, “But consider the outcome, and you will realize that they were wrong, while Noah was right.”⁸¹

As we have observed, part of the pain of the office of prophet is the concrete realization that destruction was near, that it would happen as the Lord had said. Another part is isolation underlined by knowing—because God has spoken—that what you say in his name is true, though the whole world stands against it. A third component is, in a sense, a corollary to this: the world’s response is to despise and to hate God’s prophets.⁸²

According to Luther, the world treated the patriarchs (he includes Lamech and Methuselah with Noah) as “feeble-minded and foolish old men.” Noah himself was considered a rebel, he was hated intensely, ridiculed, and harassed, he was regarded as stupid and worthless, and (significantly) the ungodly condemned his teaching as heresy!⁸³ Indeed, Luther supposes that more than one miracle had been necessary “to prevent the ungodly surrounding and killing him.”⁸⁴ This interpretative method of narrative exposition speaks as loudly of Luther’s situation as it does of Noah’s. Continually, the reformer directly relates the two. For example, he says, “We who affirm our faith in the gospel are regarded similarly today.”⁸⁵ And again, “He [that is, Noah] is approved by God and is acceptable to God. Surely, great was the faith of Noah that he was able to believe these words of God. I certainly would not have believed them. I realize how serious a matter it is if the opinions of all men assail one solitary individual and condemn him. . . . I would despair under such great misfortunes unless the Lord gave me the same spirit that Noah had.”⁸⁶ On the one hand, Luther keeps a reverent distance. By definition, the patriarch’s faith is greater than the reformer’s. On the other hand, he seeks to align himself with Noah in this very direct manner.

The fourth element of the situation that grieved Noah (again, paralleled in Luther) is the fact that there was little successful outcome to his ministry. We have noted this before. Some scholars claim that disappointment

⁸⁰ *Comm Gen* 6:6, LW 2.53 [WA 42.299].

⁸¹ *Comm Gen* 6:13, LW 2.64 [WA 42.307]. For an interesting essay on the significance of certainty in the Reformation period, see Susan E. Schreiner, “The Spiritual Man Judges All Things”: Calvin and the Exegetical Debates about Certainty in the Reformation,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation* (ed. R. A. Muller and J. L. Thompson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 189–215.

⁸² “The world, Satan and the ungodly do not cease their activity but continue to afflict us,” Luther says (*Comm Isa* 61:2, LW 17.334 [WA 31².519]). Notice, though, the result: “We long for the Day.”

⁸³ See *Comms Gen* 6:1, LW 2.13 [WA 42.270]; 6:3, LW 2.23 [WA 42.277]; 6:6, LW 2.50 [WA 42.297]; 6:9–10, LW 2.54–55, 59 [WA 42.300, 303]; 6:18, LW 2.71 [WA 42.312]. See also, *Comms Gen* 19:14, LW 3.268 [WA 43.66–67]; 25:11, LW 4.322 [WA 43.369]; *Comm Heb* 11:7, LW 29.236–37 [WA 57³.233–34]; *Comm 2 Pet* 2:5, LW 30.176 [WA 4.43–44].

⁸⁴ *Comm Gen* 6:9–10, LW 2.57 [WA 42.302].

⁸⁵ *Comm Gen* 6:4, LW 2.38 [WA 42.289]. See also *Comm Gen* 6:11, LW 2.60 [WA 42.304]. In the light of his own experience, it is very significant that Luther makes a great deal of the ungodly ridiculing Noah about his marriage (*Comm Gen* 6:9–10, LW 2.57 [WA 42.302]).

⁸⁶ *Comm Gen* 7:1, LW 2.87 [WA 42.324].

over failure in reforming the church increased Luther's apocalyptic response in the light of the end time. However, we observe that the line of reasoning followed by Heiko Oberman is nearer the mark. Though obviously still disappointing, failure was expected by the reformer. It was part of "the expected impact of the gospel."⁸⁷ However, Luther repeatedly mentions the problem—both for himself and for Noah before him.

Luther speaks from experience. Some of his most poignant comments read as follows. "We are teaching in vain; we are warning in vain," he says. "But what [Noah] achieved was so utterly nothing." "But you will never convince the world." Luther speaks of the godly who are unable to rectify the godless situation: "the godly . . . can judge the world . . . but cannot improve it."⁸⁸ The seemingly unrelenting repetition of such thoughts appears to be solely negative. However, Luther gives a clue that it is not entirely so, for later he comments, "we urge and warn . . . But we are spending our strength in vain, as Scripture says."⁸⁹ Though failure is always disappointing, there is a hint that the reformer sees failure as inevitable, not only because of the sin of humanity, but also because somehow it is in God's will. This brings us to look at the divine pattern set for apocalyptic history.

3. *The divine pattern of apocalyptic history.* What we have observed in our examination of Luther so far is that he understands that the world is morally and religiously deteriorating, indeed, hastening to its own end. He believes himself to be called as God's spokesman to speak his word into the situation as an end time prophet. He teaches that there is in the character and dynamic of the contemporary situation that which suggests that God is involved, and he discerns and propounds a typical apocalyptic pattern, reiterated before in history. These emphases are all present in the following comment:

These are the initial stages that always precede destruction. When God raises up holy men full of the Holy Spirit, to instruct and reprove the world, the world, intolerant of sound doctrine, indulges in sins with greater zeal and continues in them even more persistently. This was what happened at the beginning of the world, and we see the same thing is happening now at the end of the world.⁹⁰

It is interesting that in his ideas Luther establishes a pattern on the stages through which apocalyptic history moves. The first stage is the period in which God is kind and (above all) patient, overlooking humanity's sins. In that context, God leaves his saving word; he does not as yet remove it.⁹¹ The

⁸⁷ Oberman, "Teufelsdreck" 68.

⁸⁸ *Comms Gen* 6:3, LW 2.16, 28 [WA 42.273, 282]; 6:6, LW 2.53 [WA 42.299]; 6:12, LW 2.61 [WA 42.305]. See also, *Comm Gen* 6:3, LW 2.24 [WA 42.278] where Luther imagines God as saying, "Through their boundless effort My preachers and priests achieve nothing but scorn."

⁸⁹ *Comm Gen* 6:3, LW 2.24 [WA 42.278–79].

⁹⁰ *Comm Gen* 6:1, LW 2.13 [WA 42.270–71].

⁹¹ Drawing similar conclusions from Jonah's ministry, Luther says, "For whenever God's wrath is about to be kindled, He usually first sends His Word to save a few" (*Comm Jonah* 1:2, LW 19.40 [WA 19.193]).

second stage is made inevitable by the world's continuance in sin and disregard of God's Word. It is reached as God sees the wickedness and responds to it in wrath. At that point, according to the reformer, there is "no hope for penitence or reformation. When that stage is reached at the time of Noah, the decisive verdict was pronounced at last."⁹² The third stage is one of salvation and destruction, the Last Day.⁹³ It is important to see that Luther speaks forcefully of both its negative and its positive connotations. In it, all of God's enemies will be smitten in judgment; but simultaneously his people will see him face to face. Though in the biblical context of the flood, Luther cannot resist drawing the more positive conclusion. He says, "we shall be like the angels of God. Our life will be to know God, to delight in the wisdom of God, and to enjoy the presence of God."⁹⁴ In this way he encourages himself and others during difficult and testing days. After all, God is at work in all of this, his work is never in vain, "For He is not inclined to take upon Himself the useless task of threshing empty chaff."⁹⁵

It is clear that Luther thinks of himself as living in a second stage: the word has been lost, faith has ceased to exist, humanity is given over to persistent impenitence and reprobate minds, there is a rejection of sound doctrine and a resistance against the Holy Spirit.⁹⁶ As we have noticed, one of the essential components of that stage is the raising up of holy men, full of the Holy Spirit. Their task is to preach the truth, to exhort the godly to righteousness and to reprove the world (including the church) of pretension and ungodliness. Luther saw himself as such and he felt the burden to be almost unbearable. He depicts himself as shouting hoarsely, but achieving nothing at all, having recourse mainly to fervent prayer.⁹⁷ This latter activity is vital in the scheme of things as envisaged by the reformer. Just as in

⁹² *Comm Gen* 6:13, LW 2.63 [WA 42.306–7]. For Luther's perception of the stages through which history moves in this period, see *Comms Gen* 6:12, LW 2.61 [WA 42.305]; 6:13, LW 2.65 [WA 42.308]; 7:1, LW 2.86 [WA 42.322]; 7:4, LW 2.89 [WA 42.325]; 7:12, LW 2.95 [WA 42.329]; 7:17–24, LW 2.99 [WA 42.332].

⁹³ It should be noted that for Luther there is no triumphal millennium for the people of God, no thousand years' reign or Church blessing before the return of Christ in judgment. He anticipates that the true Church would have enemies right up to the Second Advent of Christ. Luther opposed the chiliastic expectations of others—prominent, for example, in the teaching of Thomas Müntzer, Hans Hut, Melchior Hoffman, the Anabaptists, spiritualists and other radicals (see R. B. Barnes, "Millenarianism," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (ed. H. J. Hillerbrand; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 3.61–62). Luther was amillennialist in thinking, generally following Augustine's view (see *De civitate Dei*, 20.9). Space does not allow discussion, but for Luther's teaching see *supputatio annorum mundi* (WA 53.152–54), cited by Lohse, *Luther's Theology* 334; *Comm Ps* 110:1, LW 13.264. Also, P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 418–19; J. F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findsay: Dunham, 1963) 55–56. The teaching is summarized in *The Augsburg Confession* (1530) section 17 in *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (ed. M. A. Noll; Leicester: Apollos, 1991) 92–93.

⁹⁴ *Comm Gen* 8:22, LW 2.129 [WA 42.353]. See also, *Comms Gen* 6:1, LW 2.12 [WA 42.270]; 6:3, LW 2.24 [WA 42.278–79]; 6:6, LW 2.51 [WA 42.297]; 6:12–13, LW 2.61, 66 [WA 42.305, 308]; 7:1, LW 2.84 [WA 42.321].

⁹⁵ *Comm Gen* 6:3, LW 2.24 [WA 42.279]. Notice the heavily apocalyptic image in this comment. It comes in the context of quotes from Matt 3:12 and Isa 49:8—both referring to the Last Day.

⁹⁶ See *Comms Gen* 6:4, 5–6, LW 2.38, 39–40 [WA 42.289, 290]; 6:11, LW 2.59–60 [WA 42.304].

⁹⁷ *Comms Gen* 6:5–6, LW 2.41 [WA 42.290]; 7:1, LW 2.84–85 [WA 42.322], respectively.

normal circumstances the waters are held back by the power and mercy of God, so anger and destruction are restrained, because godly men, filled with the Spirit, pray. One of the crucial undertakings of those called to be end time prophets is that they become “walls against the wrath of God.” It is the fact that the patriarch, Noah, was ultimately unable to buy time that makes the judgment so intensely awful.

The subjects of prayer and preaching, in this context of impending judgment, are apocalyptically charged. The task and responsibility is given to the reformer and devolves quite naturally to the church. In the following comment, notice the burdened sense of ultimate impotence against divine purpose.

What shall we suppose will happen when there are no such walls, that is, when there is no church at all? The church is always a wall against the wrath of God. It grieves, it agonizes, it prays, it pleads, it teaches, it preaches, it admonishes, as long as the hour of judgment has not yet arrived but is impending. When it sees that these activities are of no avail, what else can it do than grieve deeply over the destruction of impenitent people?⁹⁸

The weight of all this falls squarely and specifically upon the reformer’s shoulders. He asks, with pathos, “What will happen when we are dead?” And again, “What will be in store for us in this insane state of a world that is growing old?”⁹⁹

IV. REFLECTIONS ON THE NATURE OF LUTHER’S UNDERSTANDING

This short essay began by delineating suggestions concerning traditional apocalypticism in the period of the European reformations proposed by R. B. Barnes and Heiko Oberman. As we noted, according to their analyses apocalypticism seeks insight into the significance of the present for the cosmic struggle between God and the devil. It believes that the end of the world is imminent, that antichrist has appeared, and that the ungodly must be warned and believers comforted.¹⁰⁰ Notwithstanding Lohse’s contrary view, I then indicated a preference for the opinion that Luther’s apocalypticism is an essential component in his theological thinking and that it is such from the beginning. An examination of the reformer’s exposition of the flood narrative showed this in action in a mature work.

Luther occasionally applies the Genesis passage to help individuals in their personal and devotional walk with God.¹⁰¹ But what is significant is that he evidently prefers to take the opportunity afforded by the subject

⁹⁸ *Comm Gen* 6:6, LW 51 [WA 42.298].

⁹⁹ *Comms Gen* 6:3, LW 2.18 [WA 42.274]; 7:1, LW 2.85 [WA 42.322], respectively.

¹⁰⁰ Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis* 18; idem, “Apocalypticism” 63; Oberman, “Teufelsdreck” 57.

¹⁰¹ What I mean by this is that he makes personal application such as the following: “Let us therefore learn to fear the Lord and with humility to receive his Word and to obey it” (*Comm Gen* 7:4, LW 2.89–90 [WA 42.325]). The interesting thing is that this is exceptional in Luther. Most of what he says by way of application is directly apocalyptic in subject. This contrasts starkly with Calvin, for example, for whom all the application is of a personal nature. See *Comm Gen* 6–9, CO 23.111–49.

matter to concentrate on the apocalyptic aspect suggested by the passage. We have seen that he relates the time of Noah to his own in a direct parallelism—so much so that it is often difficult, if not impossible, to discern to which age he is referring. He sees his own age in apocalyptic terms. It is deteriorating, both morally and religiously, it seems to be hastening to the end, to the Last Day. There seems to be no hope of stopping this advance.

When the Reformer asks who is responsible for this decline and threatened future, the answer is that many are involved. The godless world is to blame, certainly, but Luther puts most of the blame onto the Catholic Church and the pope in particular. They have suppressed the word and followed their own imaginations rather than the purposes of God. Behind the human struggle is the cosmic one in that the devil enslaves those willing to follow him. Of course, God in some way allows the world to develop as it has, though, of course, his will is for all to turn to him. The point is that these are all classic characteristics of apocalyptic thought.

What is most striking about Luther's commentary on the Noahic passage, however, is his insistence that Noah is his parallel. As he develops this idea, we see that it functions in several ways. It provides him with divine sanction as a prophet of the end time, of course; but it does more than that. It centralizes Luther in both the cosmic and the temporal, world-bound struggle, that is, he is able to see his reforming work as essentially set in an apocalyptic context. Indeed, it is itself apocalyptic in nature. Just as Noah stood alone against the world, so Luther envisages himself alone against the Church. As Noah was a martyr—suffering in the cause of God—so Luther suffers at the hands of his enemies and in the isolation and grief concomitant to his work. As the patriarch wrestled in the cosmic struggle between God and the devil, so Luther wrestles to do God's work in what is ultimately a hopeless situation. Some will turn, but the majority of people have reached that point of being abandoned to destruction; it is this that causes most grief. Yet, conversely and importantly, it is Noah's character that most encourages Luther's faith, for, as the Reformer points out, in the end everyone else was wrong, but Noah was right.