Dithmar, Reinhard. "Martin Luther als Fabelhans" [Martin Luther as Teller of Fables]. *Luther* 64:2 (1993) 67–78.

In 1566 a biography of Luther in sermons by Johannes Mathesius was published. Of these, the seventh sermon is dedicated to Luther's interest in Aesop's fables. The fable of Jotham (Judg. 9:6-15), son of Gideon, is used as an example and becomes the theme of this sermon. For Mathesius this text serves as proof that the fables of the Old Testament, as well as fables in general, are of significance.

In the *volk*-sermons of the Middle Ages the fable had an assured place. Even the Counter Reformation made use of this tradition. Among the laity fables were well liked, drew people into the church, and helped banish church sleep. The question of whether or not fables even had a rightful place in the pulpit was answered by Wolfgang Rauscher (1641–1709) with a compromise. One should not tell fables too frequently from the pulpit, and never those that only seek to draw out laughter. Further, the preacher should never simply tell a story, but always seek to separate the kernel from the hull, to discover its truth.

In the Middle Ages the word "fable" could mean either a story which depicted a clear truth, or a story meant only to entertain. This twofold meaning led to frequent misunderstandings. To these misunderstandings belongs the still frequently misused passage of Scripture in chapter 4 of Paul's Second Letter to Timothy. The term "fable" (*mythoi*), as used here, refers to the secret teachings of Gnosticism. There is no reference here to "fable" as a literary form.

Martin Luther had a lifelong interest in fables. His work contains not only his study of Aesop's fables, but numerous further fables, fable-like texts, parabolic passages, and proverbs. In contrast to the reworked fables of Aesop, we find that the fables and fable-like texts contained in Luther's *Letters* and in his *Table Talks* have concrete personal and historical references, a "Sitz-im-Leben," which must be taken into consideration for a proper appreciation and understanding of his literary accomplishments.

In Luther's commentary on Psalm 101 (WA 51:197–264), which is richly ornamented through numerous proverbs and word pictures, he gives special significance to the fables of Aesop. In this he emphasizes the distinction between the two regiments. In the worldly realm, which is ruled by reason rather than the Word of God and the prophets, one is to read "heathen books and writings," especially the writings of Aesop, to gain understanding. In contrast to biblical commentary, fables have only a temporal worth. They mediate life-lessons for the worldly realm. The two realms are never to be confused. Next to the office of preacher, the worldly office is little more than a shadow, yet it has an important temporal worth, since it serves to maintain peace, right, and life.

In his fable of the Lion and Donkey (WA 26:534, 545–54), for example, Luther addresses himself with biting irony against the confusion of the regiments and against the pope (pictured here and in other places in the form of a donkey) as ruler of both realms, and against the folly of the Germans, who through foxlike cunning have been tricked to bow down under the spiritual regiment instead of following their rightful worldly ruler and king. Luther frequently recognized and pointed to the political meaning of fables.

Though Luther, in spite of his early interest and Melanchthon's urging, never completed his reworking of Aesop's fables, he treasured the fable throughout his life.

HDR