

Luther's World

To understand Martin Luther and his life as a reformer of the Church, it is helpful to understand the world in which he lived. The vast majority of us know that Luther was a German. But when Luther was born in 1483, there was no country of Germany. Instead there was the Holy Roman Empire that was the descendent of the great empire of Charlemagne. Although the Holy Roman Empire (HRE) comprised Germany, it also included present day Belgium, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Switzerland, Austria, Northern Italy, and parts of Poland. The Holy Roman Emperor was the supreme lord over all these lands which is why Luther was called to an audience with the Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms. Holy Roman Emperors, however, were hardly absolute rulers of all these lands. His empire consisted of over three hundred states ranging in size from the Kingdom of Bohemia and the Duchy of Bavaria to some little castle with a thousand acres belonging to a semi-robber baron. Ninety of these states were archbishoprics, bishoprics, and important wealthy monasteries which exercised secular jurisdiction along with ecclesiastical jurisdictions. The Emperors had little power to tax and important princes and archbishops could defy the Emperor if they felt like

it and there was limited scope for the Empire to strike back. Hence, Frederick the Wise, the Elector of Saxony, could protect Luther with impunity.

We also tend to assume that all European monarchies were hereditary. The HRE was an elective monarchy. When the old emperor died, there was an election but it was not a popular election. Only seven territorial princes had a vote. They bore the title of Elector. Four of the Electors were secular princes – the King of Bohemia, the Duke of Saxony, the Margrave of Brandenburg, and the Count Palatinate of the Rhine. The other three Electors were the Archbishops of Cologne, Mainz, and Trier.

To add to the confusion, Luther's patron, Frederick the Wise, was a member of the Witten family. During the fifteenth century, the Witten family split the family lands in the Electorate of Saxony and the Duchy of Saxony. Just as Frederick the Wise steadfastly supported Luther, his relative Duke John of Saxony resolutely opposed Luther, although that changed in the next generation.

Luther was born in the town of Eisleben. At the time Eisleben was part of the territory of the Count of Mansfeld. That made Luther a subject

of the Count. But later when he took up his post at the University of Wittenberg, he became a subject of the Elector of Saxony. The University of Wittenberg was a newly founded institution. It had no reputation and would have been considered a backwater. But Frederick the Wise wanted his university to be a great university and Luther proved to be a rising scholar. Hence Frederick the Wise wanted to protect one of his prize professors.

Outside of the HRE, the most important kingdom was France. It has a large population and an abundance of good farmland, both important resources in the pre-industrial age. French kings also had extensive powers to tax and a standing army. They were truly kings. The kings of England were much weaker even though this was era of Henry VIII. Scotland was an independent kingdom and Ireland, while technically a possession of the king of England was largely un-subdued. Spain had only been united into a kingdom by the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. It was a rising power. Italy, like Germany, was a patchwork of independent states including the Papal States.

The Emperor Charles V was a member of the Habsburg family. Due to a series of marriages, Charles V became the king of Spain, lord of the Netherlands, and head of the Habsburg lands centered on Austria. This inheritance made him at nineteen the most powerful man in Europe. It also meant that his lands surrounded France which was something that made the kings of France very nervous. Furthermore, he inherited conflicting claims with the King of France to lands in Italy. As a result, he fought a series of wars with France that kept him distracted from events in Germany. [see the chronology]

There was another rising power that had all of Europe worried from east to west, north to south, and from Pope and kings down to peasant. That power was the Ottoman Turks. They had conquered the great city of Constantinople in 1453, the last remnant of the original Roman Empire. They were also expanding in both the Balkan Peninsula and the Mediterranean lands. The Ottoman Sultans was staunch, even fanatical Muslims of the Sunni variety. Their empire was expanding and it threatened the lands of Charles V. He had to fight them in naval wars in the Mediterranean and to stave off Turkish invasions in central Europe.

His Austrian capital of Vienna was besieged briefly during 1529. So Emperor Charles was forced into a series of wars with the Ottoman Turks which kept him further distracted from the religious situation in Germany. [see the chronology] This situation gave the Protestant princes and rulers of Germany leverage to promote the Reformation by withholding military aide against the Turkish threat. Once again, Luther was unwittingly benefiting from the political situation in Europe.