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Martin Luther: Faith, Mysticism And The Human Person

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MARTIN LUTHER:
FAITH, MYSTICISM AND THE HUMAN PERSON

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Martin Luther:
Faith, Mysticism, and the Human Person

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Thesis Outline

Thesis Statement – Although Luther’s early concept of saving faith was heavily influenced by the German mystical tradition, Luther moved against the mystical tradition, particularly Johannes Tauler’s optimistic anthropology, in later life to protect himself and his doctrine of saving faith (Sola Fide) against accusations of semi-Pelagian tendencies.

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Preface

Luther’s doctrine of faith shook sixteenth-century Western Christendom. The timeliness and potency of his theological concepts, specifically *Sola Fide*, caused thousands of individuals to break away from the Roman Catholic Church and form what is known today as the Protestant movement. The Biblical roots of this doctrine have been well studied. Luther’s commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans remains at the center of the faith debate even into modern times. What requires further research within this timely and polemic discussion, however, are the traditional forces that shaped what seemed to be a momentous shift in Luther’s doctrine. I will be focusing on two forces that may have affected this change: first, the mystical tradition of Johannes Tauler that shaped Luther’s understanding of faith with an act of humility and, second, Luther’s theological context which precipitated the Reformation, but which, at the same time, brought Luther closer to the dangers of semi-Pelagianism.

Luther’s original teaching on faith was shaped by the mystical and Nominalist tradition and ended up seemingly rejecting both, at least ostensibly. However, I will be arguing that an investigation into these traditions as received by Luther, especially the mystical tradition, is crucial to fully grasp Luther’s own mature theology of faith. This investigation will show that the mature theology was not as dependent upon what the mystical tradition added to it. Rather, it was reliant upon what the theology had formerly

1 Latin trans: Faith Alone
2 There has been work done upon the topic of Luther’s shift in understanding of faith. Steven Ozment in his work *Homo Spiritualis* did a linguistic comparison of Luther, Gerson, and Tauler in hopes of establishing a link between the mystical and Luther’s theology. Ozment also made brief note of the shift in his work, *The Age of Reform*. Ernst Bizer and A.V. Muller both have also done an examination of this topic. I will examine the topic specifically in terms of the anthropological viewpoint and seek to place it in an earlier period than Tauler or Bizer. I believe that approach sufficient to make this an unique piece of research.
embraced from the tradition and then rejected. Out of this rejection, Luther’s mature theology can be placed into an effective contextual framing. I will also show that his rejection of the mystical tradition occurred because of more doctrinal than polemics reasons. Although Luther changed his early concept of saving faith (*Fides Humilitate Formata*) in difficult times, Luther moved against the mystical tradition in later life to protect his doctrine of saving faith (*Sola Fide*) against accusations of semi-Pelagian tendencies.

Steven Ozment sums up the intent of this exploration of Luther’s shift in theology in relation to the mystical tradition:

Luther’s hermeneutical breakthrough in 1515-1516, inconsistent though it may have been, and his permanent rupture with the Pelagian covenant theology of late medieval Nominalism in the same period are at the very least simultaneous with if not theologically consequent upon the rejection of Tauler’s basic ontological and anthropological presuppositions.5

Ozment notes both Luther’s ontological and anthropological rejection of Tauler. However, I believe that the key to Luther’s rejection of mystical theology can be found predominately in anthropological motives. As a result, my approach to the subject will be systematic and arising from Luther’s and Tauler’s anthropologies. Since Pelagianism and its various manifestations were the theological concepts against which Luther was trying to clarify himself, it is especially important to look at the human person in relation to salvation, not vice-versa. This focus upon the human being allows for a thorough

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3 Latin trans: Faith formed by humility
4 The German scholar, Ernst Bizer, coined this term, along with *Fides Ex Auditu* (Faith from hearing). Together, the terms provide an excellent summation of Luther’s understanding. Bizer placed this important shift later (1518) than the period that is going to be discussed in this paper and, therefore, the paper will make use of his terminology but not his chronology.
examination of the salvific process without involving any concepts that are not anthropocentric in nature, such as Jesus’ effects upon salvation.

In an attempt to see this shift in Luther’s thought, it is necessary to look at Luther’s thought in two different time periods. Luther’s first major theological work was his *Lectures on the Psalms* (1513). That work presents itself as both an early and pristine work, untouched by the criticism that would follow later in Luther’s career as his theology became more public. The second of Luther’s works that I will utilize is his *Lectures on Romans* (1515). These writings directly follow Luther’s Lectures on Psalms, and their usage is essential for two reasons. First, because of the proximity in time of the commentary on Romans to the one on Psalms, the two commentaries will provide the best material to examine a subtle change in Luther’s thought. Second, the *Lectures on Romans* is written at a time when Luther was moving out of academic obscurity closer to the limelight of the Reformation and his famous posting of the Ninety-five Theses (1517).

In terms of the mystical thought that Luther appropriated, I will be using Johannes Tauler’s *Sermons* as a reference point. As will be discussed later, Luther provided marginal commentary on Tauler’s *Sermons* and, therefore, had undeniable contact with the medieval mystic. Tauler as a historical figure will be discussed later, but it is without dispute that his mystical theology has appeal to a wide number of individuals both during his time and today. As Elliot noted in his translation of Tauler’s sermons, “[Christians]
will find Tauler a master of the entire course between repentance for grievous sin and ecstatic union with God.”

The first section of this thesis will summarize the mystical tradition that influenced both Tauler and Luther’s theologies. This summary will set the context for the anthropological and theological discussions that follow. However, it will provide neither a complete nor a comprehensive examination of the traditions.

The second section of the thesis will present the anthropologies as related to salvation and salvation schemes of Tauler and Luther (pre-1515). Fundament points will be noted at the end of each of the chapters that will be used in later sections for comparison. The anthropologies will be presented first to provide a basis for Luther and Tauler’s understandings of salvation, which will follow.

Section three will compare the conclusions arrived at in the second part. Again, in terms of order, the anthropologies will be presented first. The reader should be aware that the anthropologies are fundamentally different, so beginning with them might seem awkward. However, as the comparisons will show, the differences exhibited in the anthropologies give a deeper understanding why Luther was never considered a mystic and, more importantly, why he moved away from the mystical tradition later in his career. The comparisons of the salvation schemes follow the comparison of the anthropologies. In the salvation schemes, concepts from the mystical tradition that were appropriated by Luther can be seen clearly, especially the idea of the rebirth of the soul.

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The fourth section of the thesis will focus on Luther’s change in his understanding of salvation. The change will be illustrated by viewing one of Luther’s later works, *Lectures on Romans*, and comparing it to the conclusions drawn in the second part of the paper. In turn, this comparison will make clear two points: first, Luther’s relation to the German mystical tradition in terms of anthropologies and the rebirth of the soul and, second, why his shift in understanding was tied to his relationship with this mystical tradition and how it was influenced by the threat of Pelagianism.

Due to the complexity of this subject, it is necessary to limit a scope of this comparison. Because of the breadth of German mysticism and of Luther’s thought, this thesis will remain limited to the discussion of Johannes Tauler and Luther in their anthropological-theological understandings of humanity.
Chapter One: Introduction to Luther’s Systematic Thought

For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law.
Romans 3:28 NRSV

Before attempting to examine any change in Luther’s theology, it is helpful to have a complete understanding of what Luther’s theology matured into at the end of his theological journey. Perhaps the most basic and easiest way to approach Luther’s mature theology is through his tri-part system of Sola Fide, Sola Gratia, and Sola Scriptura.8

Sola Fide is the key term that Luther coined during the heat of the reformation. In addition, it is the most central concept of Luther’s “solas” that this comparison will examine. The other two terms Sola Gratia and Sola Scriptura are pertinent to this discussion for the context they provide for Sola Fide, so they will be discussed here first.

Luther’s understanding of Sola Gratia meant that salvation could never be achieved through any other means than by the grace of God. In Luther’s mind, no human work or effort would ever be sufficient for a human being to draw any closer to salvation or God.

Sola Gratia, on the other hand, does not leave humanity without a burden to shoulder. Thus enters the term Sola Fide. The human being is still required to act: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”9 Sola Fide is the appropriate human response to Sola Gratia for Luther. If a person responds with faith to Jesus’ resurrection and the remittance of sins, then he or she will be saved. Faith is the only attribute people need for salvation. Luther best explains this doctrine around 1520:

8 Latin trans: “Faith alone,” “grace alone” and “scripture alone,” respectively
9 Romans 10:9 NRSV
All depends on faith. He who does not believe is like one who must cross the sea, but is so timid that he does not trust the ship; and so he must remain and never be saved, because he does not embark and cross over.¹⁰

Undeniably, Luther found this concept of *Sola Fide* coupled with *Sola Gratia* in scripture. Thus, Luther’s detailed textual study of scripture led him to assert that all necessary knowledge for salvation was contained within the Bible. Therefore, the last tenet of his reformation platform was *Sola Scriptura.*

In his mature theology, Luther understood *Sola Gratia* as the first action within the plan of salvation and *Sola Fide* as simply a reaction of the accepting human being to God’s giving divine grace. This Lutheran doctrine came heavily under criticism during the Council of Trent in the late 1540’s. Luther’s understanding of Romans 3:28 and *Sola Fide* was viewed as such a great threat that the council outright anathemized *Sola Fide:*

> If anyone saith that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ’s sake, or that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified, let him be anathema.¹¹

The council clearly had issues with letting Luther’s understanding of justifying faith stand. Simply declaring that justification by faith is the means of salvation, an individual faced expulsion from the Roman Catholic Church. Luther was especially in danger in terms of his orthodoxy. By being solely reliant upon faith for salvation, Luther had circumvented the traditional Catholic sacramental system and, thereby, presented a serious threat to the Catholic ecclesiastical infrastructure.

Although Luther’s theology of justifying faith as “nothing else than confidence in

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¹⁰ Luther, *Works*, Vol. II, p. 25: It is clear in this passage that Luther viewed faith as the only means of achieving salvation. Most scholars accept that Luther had completed the transformation of his understanding of faith by 1520. This quotation is thereby representative of a mature Lutheran theology.
the divine mercy” was so clearly stated by the Council of Trent, this central aspect of Luther’s theology was not always as distinct. His understanding of a faithful reliance upon God’s grace was not as clear when the young Luther undertook writing major theological works. Earlier in his career, Luther’s understanding of faith and the role that humanity could play in salvation was evolving. As Steven Ozment notes, “Luther conceived saving faith to be faith formed by humility (fides humilitate formata) – not the faith of mature Reformation that came from only hearing God’s word (fides ex auditu).”

The difference in these understandings of faiths raises several important questions: When did the transition in Luther’s understanding of faith take place? Was this transition a substantial change in Luther’s doctrine? In other words, did the threat of semi-Pelagianism in the scholastic Catholic heritage to which Luther subscribed actually encourage him to make a concrete change in his understanding of faith?

To begin to understand the implications of such questions and to fully understand their answers, Luther’s doctrine of Sola Fide first must be deconstructed from his earlier works. Then a delineation of its transformation must be constructed from the theological premises found in those works. Since Sola Fide is effectively the human side of Luther’s economy of salvation, an examination of Luther’s anthropology is a logical point of departure. Nevertheless, for this examination to be effective, it is best to put Luther into the context of his contemporary theologians and the mystical tradition of his time.

These contexts are essential to understanding Luther’s changing concept of faith because

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11 Council of Trent, Session 6, Can. 12
12 There is a great deal of disagreement on the dates when Luther was developing his understanding of faith. Scholars give dates ranging from 1515 to 1525. Because of this ambiguity, the construction of a specific chronology will be undertaken at the end of this paper after an exploration of his early career (1515-1517) is conducted.
they influenced his theology in both positive and negative fashions. It also helps frame Luther’s theology into the dynamic and exciting time in which he lived.


Chapter Two: Luther’s Theological Context

The time leading up to the Reformation was busy with political, social, and theological advances. However, these advances were only glimmers of the changes to come during and after the Reformation. Removing Luther from his context would not allow an individual to account for the many forces that educated, threatened, and inspired him. A removal from this dynamic context would also severely damage any attempt to discuss the changes Luther himself undertook.

Luther’s first major engagement with his theological context was during his education at the University of Efrurt. The education Luther received at Efrurt could be considered normative for the time. Like many universities in Europe, progressive thinking was neither common nor encouraged. Luther received a medieval course of Aristotle, Virgil and other writers embraced by the Scholastic tradition. After receiving his Bachelors of Arts, Luther began to pursue a degree in law.

However, Luther’s path at Efrurt was not one of a typical student. During a trip home in 1505, Luther was caught in a thunderstorm that brought about his conversion. Upon returning to Efrurt, Luther entered the Augustine monastery there. His education progressed at the monastery, where he came into contact with the Nominalist tradition.

At the time of Luther, Nominalism had been in development for centuries. The originator of the movement was William of Ockham, who had been most concerned with God’s powers and their effects upon the human person. Arising out of this concern, the Nominalists of Luther’s time affirmed that, “God’s natural gifts of reason and conscience

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had not been eradicated by the Fall.\textsuperscript{16} They came to this belief by intending to preserve human freedom. They thought that humanity’s ability to love God only after an infusion of His grace was destructive to humanity’s freedom. Consequently, to preserve free will, humanity had to have the tools necessary to love God without grace.

Luther’s education at the monastery at Efrurt provided him with ample amounts of the Nominalist tradition. He was exposed to Ockhamistic writers such as Gabriel Biel. According to Phillip Melanchthon, Luther’s friend and follower, Luther achieved a mastery of the Nominalist tradition. His education provided him with the information that he would later use as an opposing view to his own theology.

However, young Luther was uncomfortable with the implications of the Nominalist constructs.\textsuperscript{17} His work \textit{Disputation Against Scholastic Theology}, published immediately prior\textsuperscript{18} to his posting of the 95 \textit{Theses}, presents a case strongly against Ockhamistic theology. In that work, Luther made it plain that he understood the Nominalists as a new wave of Pelagian thinkers. It was against this tradition that Luther moved throughout his life.

\textsuperscript{16} Ozment, \textit{The Age of Reform}, 234.  
\textsuperscript{17} Oberman, \textit{The Dawn of the Reformation}, 95  
\textsuperscript{18} 1517
Chapter Three: Luther and Mysticism

Whether the early Luther was influenced by German mystical tradition is a point that modern scholars debate very little. It is undeniable that Luther was exposed to various thinkers within the tradition (e.g. Eckhart, Tauler, and Gerson). Listing the Theologia Germanica as third on his list of influential books, falling only under the Bible and Augustine’s collective writings, it is clear that the young Luther highly valued the German mystical traditional writings. In fact, his association with the Theologia Germanica is so strong that today his name is often used in place of the original writer, who remains anonymous.

Luther heavily engaged himself with one medieval German mystic, Johannes Tauler, during his early career. He wrote just fewer than one hundred marginal comments to twenty of Tauler’s sermons. In these notes, Luther not only comments upon Tauler’s theology, but made explicit reference to another mystic, Jean Gerson. Luther made comparisons between Gerson and Tauler’s theologies, most notably their anthropologies. Luther’s critique of Tauler’s sermons indicates that Luther valued Tauler’s mystical theology as a school of thought worthy of investigation.

Luther’s early attention to Tauler’s mysticism raises the question as to whether Tauler’s writings had produced an impact in Luther’s original understanding of faith.

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19 Hoffman, Bengt. Luther and the Mystics: A Re-Examination of Luther’s Spiritual Experience and His Relationship to the Mystics. Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1976: 15
20 Scholars such as Johannes Ficker and A. V. Muller are able to place Luther’s marginal comments on Tauler’s sermons around the date of 1515 through handwriting analysis and contextual considerations, respectively.
21 Ozment, Steven, “Aid to Luther’s Marginal Comments on Johannes Tauler’s Sermons”, 307
22 Luther’s comparison between Gerson and Tauler is another excellent avenue for discussing Luther’s relation to the mystical tradition. In his work, Homo Spiritualis, Steven Ozment makes a thorough discussion of this topic. Heiko Oberman also makes note of this topic in The Dawn of the Reformation. Although it is not nearly as exhaustive and comprehensive as Ozment’s, Oberman provides a brief
Since the examination of Luther’s concept of faith will be conducted from his
anthropology, it is appropriate to make the same kind of assessment of Tauler and try to
draw conclusions about his economy of salvation. Once these conclusions are drawn, it
will be a simpler task to scrutinize Luther’s and Tauler’s writings to see where their
theological schemes converge or diverge.

summary that is very helpful.
Chapter Four: Tauler’s Anthropology

Mainly a preacher and a mystic, Tauler has no known writings other than his *Sermons*. Since these are actual sermons that Tauler delivered to his medieval audience, explicit theological statements and descriptions are not prevalent in these texts. Nevertheless, it is possible to glean information from these sermons in terms of his anthropological view of the human being prior to salvation, during the salvific process, and after salvation is achieved.

In Tauler’s sermons, the most developed part of his anthropology is his concept of the soul. This emphasis on the soul is not surprising when assessing Tauler’s mystical beliefs, as he would be most likely to focus upon the part of a human being that is most capable of mystical action(s). Although the focus of the *Sermons* is undoubtedly upon the soul, Tauler does provide his audience with an anthropological construction of the human being:

> Although he is one man, man exists as if he were three men. The first is the outward, animal, sensing man; the second, the rational man with his rational powers; and the third is the *gemuete*, the highest part of the soul.23

*Gemuete* is a difficult term to contend with in Tauler’s anthropology. It is most directly translated from German as “mind,” but by the distinctions in the previous passage, Tauler is attempting to construct a different definition. He allows room for both a rational portion of the soul, typically defined as the mind, and then further extends the functions by presenting the concept of *gemuete*. He distinguishes it further from the rest

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of the soul when he states, “It is far higher and deeper than the [other] powers of the soul; for these powers draw all their strength from it, are in it and flowed from it.”\textsuperscript{24} For the other functions of the soul to “flow from it” would require a preexistence of the gemuete.

Tauler also assigns existential and essential conditions to the gemuete in the same passage that are important to keep in mind. The gemuete, he explains is “completely pure, substantive and constructive.” It is apparent that Tauler is constructing a portion of the human soul, which is very definite in its qualities. Also, he is placing the creation of this part of the soul prior to the other parts of the soul. So, in order to find the point at where the gemuete is formed and can become the ground\textsuperscript{25} for all other functions of the soul requires that a point in time is found where the gemuete is in existence, apart from the other functions of the soul.

Tauler’s sermons find the preexistence of the gemuete when looking at John 20:17, where Jesus is speaking to Mary Magdalene:

> Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’\textsuperscript{26}

Since Jesus is clearly part of God, and he equates his Father as humanity’s Father, Tauler draws the conclusion that humanity must have been at one time as Jesus was and is. As Tauler states,

\begin{flushright}
Dis alles ist ein mensche. Als ist och maniger kunne wille in den menschen iekliks nach siner wise.\textsuperscript{24} Tauler, \textit{Die Predigten Taulers}, 350: Das ist verre hoher und innerlicher wan die krefte; wan die krefte nement al ir vermugen dannan us und sint do inne danna us geflossen und ist in allen doch ob sunder mosse.\textsuperscript{25} Sells, Michael A. \textit{Mystical Language of Unsaying}. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994: 147: The keystone medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart referred to the ground of the soul. He also made it clear that this ground was the ground of diety.\textsuperscript{26} Oxford Annotated Bible, RSV
\end{flushright}
[Humanity has] flowed from the same original ground, and we directly and rightfully belong, with all that we are, to the same goal and again in the same original ground.27

Clearly, lapsarian humanity is no longer joined with God in this way, so it becomes necessary to discern when exactly Tauler places humanity in that union with God so that a better understanding of the gemuete can be gained.

Prelapsarian humanity is the first clear option for when humanity was united with God in a manner similar to Christ’s. A return to pre-fallen humanity would clearly be free of sin, and this purity would eliminate the classic obstruction of original sin between God and humanity. Tauler does not agree. For Tauler, “nature is poisoned by the original sin and so completely self-inverted in all things that man loves himself (his createdness) more than God, God’s angels, and all that God has ever made.” 28 Humanity and nature have become so tainted with the blight of original sin that they have replaced the ground that was originally put into place by God.29 This separation by sin forces Tauler to conclude that returning to the pre-fallen nature of humanity is not sufficient because it is not possible. The corruption of nature and humanity’s integration into it has forced the necessity of the union of the gemuete and God being prior to the creation of humanity.

The second problem with the return to Adamic humankind is the fact that the gemuete is already in existence with other functions of the soul. Biblically, God created a

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27 Tauler, Die Predigten Taulers, 81: Ouch, minneclichen kinder, wer mag uns des hindern daz wir unserer minneclichen houbete nut on underlos envolgent? Wanne rehte also er ouh sprach: ‘ich gan zu unerme vatter und mume vatter,’ sine grunt und sin ende und selikeit und unser selikeit in ime; wir sint uz dem selben grunde heruzgeflossen, und mit allem dem daz wir int, so gehoerent wir rechte in das selbe ende und wider in den selben grunt.
29 Ozment, Homo Spiritualis, 27 (footnote)
humanity that was capable of reasoning and animalistic functions. The task of giving “names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field” was clearly one that required the facilities of a rational mind.\textsuperscript{30} In addition, for God to command humanity to “be fruitful and multiply” would by necessity require humankind to be capable of the faculty of reproduction.\textsuperscript{31} In Adamic humankind, the gemuete was already joined to the other functions of the soul, and, therefore, its pure nature is not a possibility. Thus, the only place for union with God is in a nature of uncreatedness.

After examining Tauler’s anthropology and, specifically, his understanding of the soul, some important conclusions can be drawn. First, it can be understood that Tauler has a highest function of the soul, gemuete, which was formed prior to creation of humanity. Second, he believes that the gemuete was formed pure in nature and in union with God. Third, Tauler believes that the gemuete is pure and united with God. He sums up his understanding of the gemuete in the following statement:

It has a God-formed and inexpressible, eternal orientation to God.... This gemuete recognizes itself as God in God, and nevertheless it is created.\textsuperscript{32}

Humanity is tied to God through the gemuete, which can succinctly be explained as the pure ground of the soul that should be the basis of all activity, but in the fall has been replaced by the false ground of the created world.

\textsuperscript{30} Gen. 2:20 RSV
\textsuperscript{31} Gen. 1:28 RSV
\textsuperscript{32} Tauler, Die Predigten Taulers. 350: Aber disse sprechen, es schouwe alwegen und mine und rebruche Gottes ane underlos. Wei das si, das losen wir nu ligen; mer dis bekent sich Got in Gotte, un noch denne ist esgeschaffen.
Chapter Five: Tauler's Economy of Salvation

In the previous section, we explained Tauler's anthropological scheme to determine what part of humanity he deemed uncorrupted by the corporeal realm and still in contact with the divine and discovered that it is the *gemuete*. We also discussed that humanity cannot return to Adamic humankind, but must return to an uncreated state to become obtain unity with God again. Clearly, for Tauler, the created world comes as a massive obstruction to any connection that humanity might seek with God. Therefore, the question arises: what process remains for humanity to return to an uncreated state and, therefore, achieve its salvation.

The answer lies in Tauler's concept of salvific order. Humanity lies outside of the realm of God because the rest of the soul, aside from the *gemuete* (that will soon be discussed), has turned away from God and toward its own createdness. Humanity's sinful nature creates for Tauler the "false ground" of the soul that covers the *gemuete* or God-given ground of the soul. The way to salvation and return to God for Tauler is a simple process. Each human being must realize the vanity and evil of his or her attachment to the created order and seek God's grace and thereby remove the spurious ground that has covered the pure and divine soul.

Whether the removal of this false ground is an act attained by God's grace or a human action alone is a dangerous point in Tauler's salvation plan. Leanings towards both directions can be seen through the breadth of Tauler's *Sermon*. Using Tauler's understanding of *gemuete* and the role of humanity in the order of salvation allows a reader to surmise Tauler's intent fully. Tauler's sermon on Isaiah 60:1 provides a

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33 The term "false ground" refers to the artificial base of the soul that humanity creates as a direct result of
comprehensive view of this problem and will be the point of departure from Tauler’s economy of salvation.

Tauler opens the sermon by declaring that God desires only one thing in this world:

Nothing upon earth but one thing, and that He has set His heart upon – that He may find the deep abyss that he has created in man’s spirit empty and ready for the perfect work He will do there. In all earth and Heaven He has full power; one thing alone is lacking Him, the accomplishment of His all holy will in man’s soul.  

Immediately, two different points in this passage should strike the reader. The first is the fact that God desires “to find the deep abyss that he has created in man’s spirit.” God’s seeking implies that there is a portion of humanity that He cannot reach because it is covered over from him. Second, God asks for “man’s consent” to help him rediscover this lofty ground. Apparently, Tauler understands that the gemuete has been so covered by the false ground of the created order that God is unable to distinguish it from the rest of the fallen human, which is blighted from original sin. As a result, God is reliant upon each individual human to help reveal this pure place to Him once again. Tauler explains later in the passage, “that a man has his own part to play in the Divine work, and that it is to arise from all things whatsoever that are not God – from all creatures, including himself.”  

Later in the sermon, it appears that Tauler would move his theology away from these semi-Pelagian leanings when he asserts that there are two kinds of people: those who attempt to “prepare the depths of their souls themselves” and those who “allow God

original sin.

34 Tauler, *Sermons and Conferences*, 113
to do the work within them." This passage has two distinct parts to it. The latter part, "allow God to do work within them," would appear to insist that the human being must be entirely reliant upon the actions of God to bring about his own salvation. However, the reliance upon God to prepare the ground and restore the gemüte is the second part of Tauler's scheme. The former part of the passage and the first part of Tauler's scheme is that the human being, "must do his part and rise from everything that is not God, away from himself and all created things." God is unable to permit salvation to occur until the human being has succeeded in shedding the created order and presenting himself to God in an empty form prepared for God's work. Human action clearly precedes God's ability to enact a salvation.

It would be appropriate now to set Tauler's ideas about salvation and the human person into the context of the theology of his time. As it was noted in the earlier section on Tauler's anthropology, he shares, and possibly draws, his language of the "ground of the soul" from Meister Eckhart. This is not the only place where Tauler and the formidable Eckhart agree on terminology or concepts. For this comparison of Tauler and Luther, the most important point where they do agree is on the concept of rebirth. For Tauler, once the false ground has been cleared, then the human being comes to a place of spiritual rebirth by finding the true, God-given portion of his or her soul. This is a very Eckhartian concept. Eckhart speaks at length of the birth of the Son. This birth of the Son is applicable to humanity and Tauler because it manifests itself in the form of spiritual rebirth for righteous human beings. Although this investigation of Tauler's

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35 ibid
36 ibid
anthropology in comparison to Eckhart’s is brief, it is noteworthy for proving Tauler sits comfortably within the mystical theological context of his time.

Now that a framework for Tauler’s understanding of salvation has been laid, turning to Martin Luther’s work on the Psalms is appropriate to begin to establish a framework from which to compare the two. Since Luther’s marginal comments on Tauler were written around 1515, Luther’s First Lectures on the Psalms from the same year provides an accurate glimpse of what Luther’s theology was like when he was encountering Tauler.

1986: 94-115; Sells, Mystical Languages of Unsaying, 147-150
Chapter Six: Luther’s Early Anthropology

“It is God who is the life of the soul as the soul is the life of the body.”

The earliest place in time that a clear anthropological view emerges in Luther’s work is in his lecture on the Psalms during 1513-1514. Prior to these lectures, Luther’s works were mainly composed of brief commentaries. Specifically, the earliest of Luther’s writings known is a marginal commentary on several of Augustine’s works. Understandably, these marginal comments provide current Lutheran scholars with very few concrete concepts of Luther’s systematic thought and can best be viewed as indicators of where his thought later progressed. Thus, Luther’s lecture on the Psalms is the best place to begin an analysis of Luther’s early understanding of the human person, the soul, and their participation in salvation.

What can be found in Luther’s work on the Psalms in terms of anthropology and the salvation scheme is magnificently focused on the human soul and its relation to God much like Tauler’s works in his Sermons. To accomplish a directed analysis between Tauler’s theological concepts and those of Luther’s early theology, a focus on Luther’s conception of the soul in the Psalms is broad enough that a scheme can be developed without dangerous abstraction.

Luther’s account of the creation of the soul is the place to begin an explanation of his anthropology. Luther begins his account of the human soul with his concept of its creation in Psalm 119:73:

The Creator of souls and Former of bodies is God. He creates the souls out of nothing, but He forms the body out of the ground and out of seed.⁴⁰

The creation of the soul ex nihilo⁴¹ and the creation of the body from the ground⁴² as the corporeal earth begins a dualism between the body and soul that is carried throughout Luther’s thought. God forms the soul from nothing. Since the soul is formed in a divine realm, it is marked with a divine nature. If God has formed this part of the human being from nothing, then the soul cannot be without some divine essence. However, God forms the body from the ground. This part of creation plainly ties the body to the corporeal world and the sin that exists within. So, in the beginnings of Luther’s early anthropology, there is an inherent dialectic between the corporeal body and the divine soul. This dialectic requires further investigation of what the relationship is between two very different, but interrelated, parts of the human being.

Two dissimilar aspects of the dialectic of the body and soul need exploration to fully grasp Luther’s early anthropology: the body’s dependence upon the soul and the soul’s captivity to the body. The first aspect is that Luther saw the soul as being tied to the body or the body is tied to the soul, to exactly state his position. The strength of this dependency is depicted in his commentary on Psalm 102:4:

In [the natural body] the bones are inside the flesh, and the flesh is outside the bones, as the soul is inside the body.
And as the bones support the flesh, so soul supports the bodies.⁴³

The passage leaves very little doubt that the natural body is dependent upon the soul to

⁴⁰: Luther, *First Lectures on Psalms II*, 465-466
⁴¹ Latin: from nothing
⁴² This use of the term ‘ground’ should not to be confused in the least with Tauler’s concept of the ‘ground’ of the soul.
exist. Next, in his exposition of Psalm 107:1, Luther outlines three powers of the soul: will, intellect, and memory.⁴⁴ These three functions are necessary for human life, and, therefore, Luther understands that the body simply cannot function without the soul.

The second aspect of the dialectic between the body and soul is the body’s grasp upon the soul. In the passage from Psalm 102:4, Luther makes it very clear that the soul functions within the “pot” of the body, and, consequently, the soul is subject to the “concupiscence” of the body.⁴⁵ Luther’s adherence to Augustinian theology is exhibited here, as he makes clear that the soul is bound to the body and, consequently, subject to the original sin of Adam contained within the body. This bondage of the soul to an earthly body, an earthly existence, is separated from the Creator who brought it forth. This relationship to the corporeal realm is so strong that even the functions of the soul are incapable of escaping the powerful grip of the body. Luther asserts that the functions of the soul are still very weak and must remain in “their stable.”⁴⁶ Evidently, Luther sees the restrictions of the body upon the soul as complete and thorough, although the soul is capable of better things. If the powers of the souls are resigned to their stables (i.e. bodily existence), it is apparent that they have the potential to be both stronger when free from the corporeal body.

Luther’s anthropology is thus characterized by a soul and body dialectic. The body and the soul are joined together in the created order and share being together. While the two remain inseparable, the soul still clearly exhibits a beginning separate from

⁴³ Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms II*, 300-301
⁴⁴ Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms II*, 347
⁴⁵ Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms II*, 301
⁴⁶ Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms II*, 347
the body and is functionally superior to the body in the sense that the body is dependent upon the soul.
Chapter Seven: Luther’s Early Economy of Salvation

“For He satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry soul with goodness.”
Psalm 107:9

The greatness of the soul’s powers and its divine nature are found in Luther’s early theology in terms of salvation. To start the process of salvation, Luther looks to heaven:

First, [God] should send mercy and truth, and we shall be justified. It is not that we should first come before Him as justified people and demand His truth by our merits, but rather that we should obtain righteousness by His truth. 47

The first action in the salvific process is God’s placing truth into the human world. This placing of truth and, thereby, mercy is accomplished for Luther in the personage of Christ. Christ is both the truth and mercy of God come to earth. In the capacity of truth, Christ shows the judgment of God (Luther Psalm, 85:10). He delivers the complete law and thereby gives humanity a total picture of the works needed for salvation. Once this complete law is given, Christ completes his mission on earth by fulfilling his capacity of mercy. Through his death and resurrection, Christ enables humanity to escape the binding power of the law 48 and to achieve salvation.

This two-fold nature of Christ, according to Luther’s First Lectures on the Psalms II, comes to humanity first in the revelation of the Bible. The nature of Christ presents humanity with the knowledge necessary to initiate the salvific process. Then the nature of Christ enables salvation by his act of redemption.

47 Luther, First Lectures on the Psalms II, 170
48 In addition, the necessary works that must be performed to be in complete communion with God lie within the adherence to the law.
Once the revelation of Christ has come to humanity, it is humanity's turn to act.\textsuperscript{49}

The two-fold revelation of Christ boldly presents itself before a fallen humanity. This revelation creates two different responses:

\begin{quote}
... [believers] might learn to believe and hope in God, to love heavenly things and despise the earthly, and that [they] might always have in memory the works which he did for [them] in the flesh... [unbelievers] have forgotten and have no interest in such great things that the Lord has done for [them].\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

Those who do not accept the revelation are blatantly in rejection of Christ's works. Those who accept the revelation are presented with the knowledge of their sinfulness according to the law and then the plan of God's salvation. For Luther in this early period, this knowledge should result in the believer's coming to a sense of humiliation.\textsuperscript{51} For the believer, "the first thing for him is to be poor in spirit."\textsuperscript{52}

From the revelation of Christ, this resulting humility is beheld only by individuals who have the most important facet of salvation for the human: faith.\textsuperscript{53} The quality of faith in an individual makes apparent that he has come to believe the message of Christ and His works. By fully understanding this message, the individual should come to a point where he or she feels completely humble before God. Once this humbleness is a reality in the person, which was freely given by Jesus, he or she achieves salvation. Outside of this faith and the resulting humility, there is no salvation. Luther makes that point remarkably evident when discussing Psalm 107:9:

\textsuperscript{49} This is an important section of Luther's early economy of salvation to understand as it is the only section affected by changes as his thought progresses.
\textsuperscript{50} Luther, \textit{First Lectures on the Psalms II}, 45
\textsuperscript{51} Luther, \textit{First Lectures on the Psalms II}, 279-280
\textsuperscript{52} Luther, \textit{First Lectures on the Psalms II}, 47
\textsuperscript{53} Luther, \textit{First Lectures on the Psalms II}, 280
Until a person feels himself empty, he will not be satisfied by the Lord. One who regards himself to be full and sated and not in loneliness and error, cannot be satisfied or led back on the right road by the Lord.54

The intellectual assent to a state of humbleness is the essential point within the early formation of Luther’s understanding of faith, fides humilitate formata. This faith formed by humility allows the human being to fix into memory the revelation and works of Christ.

Once this transition into fides humilitate formata has taken place, the human being is in right relation with God. As a direct result of transformation, the soul, which was constrained to the body, is now released into its full glory. So great is this elevation in the activity of the soul, that Luther equates it to Jesus bringing life to a young girl.55

For as the ruler of the synagogue longed for Christ that his daughter who was dead might live, so the people longed for the coming of Christ to give them life from a spiritual death.56

Luther clearly intends his reader to understand that this spiritual life is a direct result of Christ, which enables “the soul [to] live and rise again.”57

This revelation sparks the question of what Luther means by a “spiritual life” and exactly why the rebirth58 of the soul is so important to this salvation process. The answer to this question is found in Luther’s understanding of righteous acts. Through the understanding of Christ, his works, and the resulting intellectual humbleness, it then becomes possible for the human being to be capable of truly good works. However, what

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54 Luther, First Lectures on the Psalms II, 351-352
55 Although this discourse about a young girl is found in his explication of Psalms 119:176, the story which Luther is referring to is located in Matthew 9:18.
56 Luther, First Lectures on the Psalms II, 534
57 Ibid.
distinguishes righteous works from good earthly works for early Luther lies in the executor of the work, not the resulting work:

"... We may not work with our own resources and our own righteousnesses but should learn to do the works of the Lord... they are not works of God unless God performs them in us. Hence also our works of righteousness are nothing in his sight." 59

The human being, even in the state of a humble faith, is incapable of performing righteous works. The key is that, once a human being has achieved humble faith, he or she does not need to perform good actions. The good actions are meaningless because truly righteous actions will be performed out of the faith and entirely independent of human action. Only God has the ability to perform righteous actions through human beings. Human beings have no ability to perform righteous actions outside the realm of faith and are completely dependent upon God. Therefore, faith is a prerequisite for any form of truly good or righteous actions.

The understanding of faith prior to good actions leads to an understanding of the soul that is very central to the salvation process. Once God has returned to the human being, then the soul is reborn. Out of this rebirth in the soul, God continues to act through the human being, and righteous acts, indicative of spiritual life, become a reality.

As was discussed earlier, it seems that Luther requires the human being to come to a state of humility before he is able to participate in an understanding of Christ and His works. 60 This humility becomes a necessary part of the human’s response to God’s revelation to allow for salvation. The intellectual action of humility occurs before the

58 It is vitally important to note Luther’s use of the concept of “rebirth.” This issue will be discussed at length in the comparison between Luther’s and Tauler’s theology of salvation. 59 Luther, First Lectures on the Psalms II, 26
completed state of salvation and, as a result, is a prior act that is before the “works of the Lord.” Therefore, Luther does not clearly define an understanding of salvation that is divorced from works. Luther seeks to remain clear on his concept of faith before works, but at this point in his thinking, that paradigm is not complete. However, Luther still is attempting to remain apart from semi-Pelagianism. This is evident by his description of Jesus as an example for humanity in his explication of Psalms 85:13:

... [Jesus was] not righteous because He did righteous deeds, but he did righteous deeds because He was righteous.  

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60 Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms II*, 351-352
61 Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms II*, 172-173
Chapter Eight: Comparison of Luther’s early and Tauler’s Anthropologies

Now that both Luther’s and Tauler’s anthropologies and conceptions about salvation have been presented, it is possible to make an accurate analysis of that which they agree and disagree at this early period of the Reformation (1515). We will first examine the anthropologies of both and thereby establish grounds for a comparison of their understandings of faith and salvation.

Since both theologians understandably focus a great deal of their attention upon the soul, a discussion about their different presentations of the soul is both appropriate and necessary. This contrast needs to occur on two different levels: first, the placement of the soul, namely its relation to the body, and, second, the function(s) of the soul.

Luther’s early view of the soul as tied with the body is distinct from what Tauler presented in his *Sermons*. While Tauler had three parts of the soul (i.e., animal, rational and the *gemüte*), Luther seems to have an understanding of a soul that functions in different capacities, but has no clear distinctions. If Luther believes in any facet of the soul that resembles Tauler’s *gemüte*, it is apparent in neither appearance nor function. This disparity between Luther and Tauler is central in the understanding of the differences between Tauler and Luther in this early anthropological scheme.

Luther’s soul lacks the third part, *gemüte*, of Tauler’s construction. Tauler understood this part as the preexistent and uncreated ground in which God resides within the human being. For Tauler, the pureness of this ground is that to which humanity seeks to return and is key to human salvation. In Luther, the defined soul is created *ex nihilo* from God, but it still appears to be thoroughly tainted by the physical world. There is no
'hidden ground' to which humanity can return in hopes of coming into contact with God. Nothing in Luther’s soul or body is free from the defilement of the physical world.

How does this basic difference play out in their respective understandings of how the soul is related to the body? The lack of the gemuete in Luther creates a difference between him and the Illuminated Doctor. Even though Tauler’s soul possesses a very divine and pure element within the corrupt body of the human, the soul and the body remain intimately tied. The soul provides the functions that the body needs to remain alive. Luther’s soul also provides the various functions that are needed for sustenance of a corporeal body, but lacks the clearly pure and divine element. Because of the absence of the truly divine part of the soul, Luther’s body and soul are much more closely conjoined. The soul has no difficulty residing in a sinful body because pureness is not an attribute that Luther assigns to the soul.

The difference in Tauler’s concepts of body and soul relation lies in the following: Tauler’s body is dependent upon the soul, but the soul remains partially untouched by the body. Tauler explicates that the gemuete part of the soul remains God-focused and pure, even though it has been taken captive by the desires of the body and earthly existence. An essence of God remains in Tauler’s human being in spite of the presence of sin. This concept is generally referred to by Ozment as the synteresis62 (divine spark), and this definition captures the quintessence of the concept63. Even in the fallen human, there remains a stronghold of pureness and divinity. Consequentially, Tauler and many of his mystical contemporaries came under fire as semi-Pelagian. If

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62 Tobin, *Meister Eckhart*, 45: This is yet another term to which Meister Eckhart referred frequently. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ozment uses this term with Tauler, as he was of the Eckhartian tradition.  
63 Ozment, *Homo Spiritualis*, 139
godliness remained in a human being in some form prior to any action of God, then it would seem entirely possible that the human being could discover and return to this godliness on his or her own account. This problem will be later discussed in Tauler's anthropological scheme.

In Luther, the joining of the soul and the body are complete, and nothing is free from the stain of sin. Similar to Tauler, the body in Luther's understanding of the body is dependent upon the soul, but unlike Tauler, the divine essence of the soul remains for Luther invariably trapped. There is nothing in Luther's commentary on the Psalms to suggest that he proposes a synteresis, nor does a similar concept appear in his anthropology.

So, it appears that there is nothing thus far in Luther's theology that can be attributed to Tauler and the German mystical tradition. Although Luther was exposed to the mysticism of Tauler, he incorporated none of Tauler's anthropology into his thought. A very important point can be inferred from this: Tauler's optimistic anthropology, earmarked by a pure and divine portion of the soul, was not congruent with Luther's understanding of the human. As a result, Luther rejected Tauler's understanding in favor of a pessimistic view of humanity that preserved a sinful state far away from any possibility of semi-Pelagian action. Noting this negative anthropological encounter with Tauler, the next point to examine is Luther's salvation scheme compared with Tauler's.
Chapter Nine: Comparison of Luther’s early and Tauler’s Concepts of Salvation

The fundamental differences in the anthropologies in Luther’s and Tauler’s theologies give rise to a distinction in their salvation schemes. Both have a soul existent in the body, but Luther’s soul, in all capacities, is seemingly closer to the body than Tauler’s gemuete ever is. Since the soul (in its entirety for Luther and in its gemuete function for Tauler) is the place where initial interaction with the divine takes place, its relation with the body is pivotal in the salvation scheme for both theologians and, specifically, the human action contained within such a scheme.

During the examination of Tauler’s salvation scheme, it was made clear that the human being must first clear his or her soul of the false ground before God can enter into it and perform His works. Tauler believes that God is literally “asking for man’s consent to bring this [the gemuete] forth.”64 Tauler seems to hold that God is incapable of acting, without the prior action of the human being. The sin and corporeal ground, which exists in the human person at that point, separates God so far from the human being that He is unable to return to the place that He created in the human, the gemuete. Tauler makes it very clear that God wishes to return to this place and, as a result, is asking the human being to make that place available again. However, He is still excluded from the human person until this action can occur.

For Tauler, this action of clearing the ground is both spiritual and bodily. Physical actions must occur to make the gemuete available again for God’s dwelling. Anything that can possibly serve as a covering over the gemuete must be cleared away,

64 Tauler, Sermons and Conferences, 114
including earthly possessions and desires. Steven Ozment comments that for Tauler’s salvation process:

In this process all alien, external, temporal things must enter into “forgetfulness.” The less nature and its joy live, the more God and His will lives; the more one wishes to live in the Spirit, so much more must he teach natural things to die. He who would follow Christ must give nature its ‘walking papers.’

The human being must be dedicated to clearing the gemuete from under the corporeal burden, striving to reject everything bodily. It seems that Tauler’s split between the body and soul has become an issue that is further reaching than just an anthropological concept. The body is so undesirable and so tainted that, for Tauler, its only function in the scheme of salvation is to be rejected wholly. The clearing of the ground is not only a preparation of an acceptable spiritual disposition for salvation, but an outright rejection of bodily desires, loves, and needs. These carnal desires are “alien” to the gemuete; and for salvation to be achieved, they should become consciously and willingly alien to the human being. Once this clearing is complete, then the human being can be fully reborn into the spiritual life.

Examining Luther’s scheme for a similar concept, the search falls upon Luther’s dubious “act of humility.” Tauler’s clearing of the ‘ground of the soul’ is easily equated to the humility act in Luther, both temporally and functionally in the salvific economy. First, they correspond in the timeline of the scheme of salvation. They come after an initial contact with the divine, but before any form of salvation is achieved. Second, they act in essentially the same fashion. They both are preparatory events to God’s entering into the human being. They precede the rebirth that both theologians view as a key point in
the salvific process. However, the rebirth of the soul is essentially where the similarities between Luther and Tauler’s schemes of salvation end and the differences begin.

The major difference between Luther’s humble act and Tauler’s clearing of the ground is that which is accomplished by the actions. As has been suggested above, Tauler’s clearing is a bodily and spiritual action that returns the human being to the gemuete ground and enables God to return to His place there. For Luther, the intellectual humility is not such a complete process. God presents the human being with the revelation of Jesus and his works and then the act of intellectual humility takes place. The humble act is an intellectual rather than a physical action. Through the revelation of God, a believer will naturally come to the understanding of her binding to sin and, as a result, become fully aware of the necessity of God’s salvation plan in her life. The humility that results from this realization enables God to move into the human and work through her.

Still the issue remains whether or not this intellectual humility can be considered a semi-Pelagian concept within Luther’s early thought. When one examines First Lectures on Psalms II in the light of both his and Tauler’s anthropologies and salvation schemes, it is understandable how one may conceive an act of humility. Both of the theologians have acts that are necessary before the final salvific act. While Tauler’s action manifests itself in both a bodily and a spiritual manner, Luther’s action remains void of bodily emphasis and, instead, solely focuses on the education of the human spirit. Although this distinction is clear, it still allows for the correlation of the human actions prior to salvation between the two theologians to occur.

65 Ozment, Homo Spiritualis, 28
Another point to consider as a similarity that brings Luther’s and Tauler’s theological traditions together is the concept of rebirth. Both Tauler and Luther have distinct concepts of rebirth in their theologies. The rebirth of the soul marks entrance into a faith relationship with God. This radical change takes place after the clearing of the ground and the attainment of intellectual humility, for Tauler and Luther respectively. It is not a coincidence that this important concept occurs chronologically in the salvific process at the same time for Luther and Tauler. The rebirth of the soul happens before salvation is achieved in its entirety. It is another striking similarity between their theologies. Consequentially, it may be said that Tauler’s mystical concept of the rebirth of the soul had a semi-Pelagian influence on Luther.

Regardless of the influences of the German mystical tradition had upon Luther, the prior humble action remains mysteriously unexplained within his theological scheme as presented in the First Lectures on the Psalms II. To clarify this point and to determine the effects of the mystical tradition upon Luther, it is now important to look of his later work. Luther wrote the Lectures on the Romans directly after his explication of the Psalms.\textsuperscript{66} With this two to three years after his commentary on Psalms, Luther can be seen as making large changes to his understanding of salvation and approaching his famous “Tower Experience.”\textsuperscript{67}


\textsuperscript{67} Luther’s “Tower Experience” is commonly accepted as the point at which Luther, through the examination of Romans 3:28, came to his understanding that faith alone justifies humanity. Luther described the experience in his Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Works: “Meanwhile in that same year, 1519… I had conceived a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans, but thus far there had stood in my way, not the cold blood around my heart, but that one word which is in chapter one: ‘The justice of God is revealed in it…’ I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: ‘The just person lives by faith.’ I began to understand that in this verse the
As the “Tower Experience” is viewed as a turning point in Luther’s career, an examination of this period will give the best clues as to what influenced this experience. Understanding this transition and the changes within Luther’s thought in that time should provide basis for a conclusion about what the German mystical Tradition had offered him and why he rejected it after this point in his intellectual and theological development.

justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: "The just person lives by faith."
Chapter Ten: Luther’s Later Anthropology

To find Luther’s anthropology and salvation scheme in close chronological proximity, it will be best to draw from Luther’s *Lectures on Romans*. Then, it will be possible to return to the content of the previous section and make an accurate comparison between Luther’s early and later anthropologies and salvation schemes. Consequently, it is first necessary to seek a starting point for Luther in this later time, both in his anthropology and in his salvation scheme.

This exploration will begin with Luther’s anthropology so that his concept of redemptive faith can be examined without neglecting the vital role of the human. To find a starting point in Luther’s anthropology, a question needs to be asked: “what anthropological concept can be completely and universally applied to all human beings in Luther’s understanding of salvation?” To answer this inquiry takes very little effort. Luther makes the point repeatedly that the body is subject to sin. In fact, the body is so imbued with sin that “sin and concupiscence remain in [humanity], until the body returns to ashes.” At this point in his career, Luther has grounded himself in a very Augustinian understanding of the human person. *Lectures on Romans* is filled with Augustinian quotations about the power of original sin and the consequences of said sin. The body lies hopelessly and entirely in the pit of sin and damnation according to the law. Therefore, the starting point for Luther in his anthropology and salvific theology is the understanding of the human being as completely subject to the grip of sin.

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68 Circa 1515-1516
69 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 309
70 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 59
With this understanding of the fallen nature of humankind, the next important point to discuss is Luther’s conception of the soul. How is the soul affected in *Lectures on Romans* by the sinful body? To see a complete picture of Luther’s view of the soul, it is necessary to construct the salvation process in a place where the human has already achieved salvation:

...There are three elements in a man, the body, the soul, and the spirit. And the soul is the mid-portion. The body is the subject to the power of the state, but with the consent and willingness of the soul, and under direction of the spirit, which is free and above all.\(^\text{71}\)

As this formulation makes clear, the soul is “under direction” of the spirit, which is indicative of a state of grace and, therefore, salvation in Luther’s scheme.\(^\text{72}\)

Clearly, in *Lectures on Romans*, there are three parts of the human being for Luther. However, this tripartite formation of the human being is true only once salvation is achieved and the spirit dwells within the body. But, prior to the state of salvation, Luther recognizes only two parts of the human being: body and soul. This is hardly a surprising distinction since it is a dualistic concept prevalent in most philosophical and theological thought. Since it is apparent that the body is completely sinful, an examination of the soul and its relation to the body will help distinguish Luther from other thinkers, specifically those of the German mystical tradition.

What can be said about the nature of the soul itself? Is it mired by the material world or does it remain above it in some form of purity? In looking at his discussion of Roman passages 1:23-24, Luther discusses a characteristic of some humans that lends itself to catching a glimpse of his understanding of the nature of the soul. Luther notes

\(^{71}\) Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 468
that some people claim that, "since they have become so vain, that they wish to teach everyone, to be wise, namely to know everything, even God Himself.""\(^{73}\)

Luther finds the idea of an individual's asserting knowledge about God difficult to stomach. He considers it an act of vanity, noting that, "these people have not ever shown that much reverence to God, that they have put Him on the same level as their inner hearts."\(^{74}\) Luther's tone of disdain for such individuals leads a reader to firmly believe that not only is human vanity a great stumbling block to salvation, but that the soul is not on the same spiritual level as that of God. The soul does not possess the same nature as its creator, but is victim to the material world. Luther further notes in the same discussion of Romans 1:24 that man is also "according to his soul 'incorruptible.'"\(^{75}\) This passage would imply that there is a spiritual difference between the "corruptible" human body and the "incorruptible" soul.

Another passage that relates to the relationship between body and soul is in Luther's look at Romans 2:12.\(^{76}\) By using the words *for every soul,*\(^{77}\) Luther points out here that even "the ungodly linger in this double distress forever." What is meant is that even those who do not know God still have His message impressed into their very being through the incorruptible soul that God placed within them. The soul remains intact, but captive to the sinful body. Although the soul does not have the qualities to ever be like God, it remains spiritually superior to the corruptible corporeal body.

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\(^{72}\) This will be discussed later, but must be noted now to work accurately backwards from this point.  
\(^{73}\) Luther, *Lectures on Romans,* 10  
\(^{74}\) Luther, *Lectures on Romans,* 11n  
\(^{75}\) Ibid.  
\(^{76}\) Luther, *Lectures on Romans,* 180  
\(^{77}\) Ibid.
Luther makes an excellent summation of his understanding of the soul and body near the end of his work on Romans:

...The soul is the medium between the body and the spirit; so that [Paul] thus may show the believer is exalted once and for all things [bodily and temporal] and yet at the same time is subject to them, and thus, being twin born.\(^{78}\)

This clear picture of both the place of the soul, between body and soul, and the function of the soul\(^ {79}\) can be considered a concrete beginning for Luther’s later mature view of anthropology. As the editor of the English translation notes, “Here the earlier stirrings of the thoughts later (1520) expressed in Luther’s *The Freedom of a Christian* are unmistakable.”\(^ {80}\)

With an understanding of the soul as the middle ground between body and spirit, it is now possible to move forward into Luther’s scheme of salvation. The gained understanding of Luther’s anthropological framework allows for an examination of how the salvific process is completed and the entirety of the human role in that process.

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\(^{78}\) Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 468

\(^{79}\) As was discussed earlier, the soul’s place between the body and spirit allows it to be a resting-place for God’s message to the sinful human.

\(^{80}\) Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 468n
Chapter Eleven: Luther's Late Economy of Salvation

A clear and powerful statement about salvation in Luther's explication of Romans 3:11 gives a clue as to where the origin of his later salvation scheme:

No one understands, because the wisdom of God is hidden, unknown to the world. For "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14), and Wisdom was made incarnate and is thus hidden and unapproachable except by understanding, just as Christ cannot be known except by revelation.81

Luther points to two things that are the origination of knowledge: understanding and revelation.

Since "understanding" appears first in the passage, this exploration will begin there. Does Luther's theology of salvation rest on the intellectual power of humanity? More importantly, does humanity have the power to comprehend the divine on their own? Luther makes it very clear that not only is a human being incapable of coming to understanding on his or her own, but that this kind of understanding is so far wrong, in fact, that the truth of God "can never come to [humanity] except as an apparent adversary to what [they are] thinking."82 Therefore, human understanding cannot rest at the base of Luther's scheme of salvation. Conversely, this insight raises the question as to exactly where human understanding enters into the salvation scheme and if the concept of revelation can function solely as the basis for a salvific scheme for Luther in Lectures on Romans.

81 Luther, Lectures on Romans, 223
82 Luther, Lectures on Romans, 236
Luther discusses the concept of revelation many times during his *Lectures on Romans*. To avoid ambiguity to what he means by the term, it becomes necessary to come to understand the operation of revelation in three different and sequential parts:

- the transmitter and receiver of the revelation,
- the message within the revelation, and
- the effects of the revelation upon the recipient.

As a beginning for this exploration, Luther’s corollary on Romans 3:7 is rich with material:

> For unless God has first come forth and sought to be truthful in us, we could not have entered into ourselves and be made liars and unrighteous men. For man of himself could not know that his is such a person before God, unless God Himself had revealed it to him.  

Although very apparent in this passage, the next two concepts explored will build a strong base for an understanding of the path of revelation for Luther. The beginning of the above passage dictates that unless God comes to the human being first there is no opportunity for the human being to realize his sinfulness. It is necessary for God to contact the human being in revelation. Once this contact is made, what is the message being conveyed to the human being?

The passage from Romans 3:7 portrays a dark picture of the message that God is sending to people. Once they have encountered this message, human beings understand that they are “liars and unrighteous men.” Ending the message of revelation at this point would have God delivering a missive that would leave humanity chastised and

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83 Luther commonly uses the term ‘Word of God’ interchangeably with ‘Revelation.’
84 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 213-214
85 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 213
without any hope. This is not the case for Luther. Earlier in his study of Romans 3:7, Luther declares that God's Word, while bringing a strong rebuke, delivers something else:

Thou wilt bring justification, "in Thy Word and wilt cleanse when Thou art judged." For He justifies, overcomes, in His Word when He makes us to be like His Word, that is, righteous, true, wise, etc. 86

Here, Luther gives the human being a hope beyond condemnation. God's revelation, referred to in this passage as simply "Word," delivers a two-part message. First, the person being exposed to the revelation comes to know his spiritual inadequacies according to the Law. 87 Knowing them is the starting point for Luther's plan of salvation. It is primary in Luther's scheme because a human being can know no sin prior to God's revelation of it to him or her.

The second part of the revelation is the most poignant and defining characteristic of Luther's maturing theology: "True righteousness comes into being by believing the words of God with the whole heart...." 88 The complete scheme of salvation is contained in the words of God and is activated by the human being's hearing and believing in them. Revelation is the starting and the ending point as it contains within it everything needed to complete the process. Therefore, the concept of redemptive faith for Luther in his Lectures on Romans is simply characterized by the hearing and accepting of the revelatory message, Fides ex Auditu. 89

86 Luther, Lectures on Romans, 211
87 Luther, Lectures on Romans, 240
88 Luther, Lectures on Romans, 410
89 Latin trans: Faith from hearing
The issue remains as to whether or not this salvation is marked by any action by the human being. Once the revelation of God is placed before the human being, he or she has the opportunity either to accept or deny it. The denial of the message simply leaves the human being in the existing sinful state that revelation discloses. Those who accept the message of God are transformed by the Holy Spirit. Luther equates this spiritual transformation with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the body with the relationship between a wound and flesh in his discussion of Romans 7:17. The wound is simply weakened flesh and, therefore, has the qualities of the flesh in a compromised state of being. In the same way, the body has the qualities of the Holy Spirit, but does not necessarily follow them:

In the same way man is at the same time both flesh and spirit. But the flesh is his infirmity, or his wound, and insofar as he loves the law of God he is spirit; but insofar as he lusts, he shows the weakness of the spirit and the wound of sin, which is in the process of being healed.

Thus, the human being who hears and believes the Good News laid bare in God's revelation is saved, but still capable of sinful deeds. The indwelling of the Spirit enables him to walk the path that God desires because the Spirit changed the qualities of the human being. Therefore, any action performed without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a “weakness of the spirit” and harshly shows the “wound of sin.”

90Luther, Lectures on Romans, 339
91Ibid.
Chapter Twelve: Luther to Luther Comparison

Now that Luther’s later understanding of humanity and salvation has been reduced down to its essential starting points, it is easily compared with his earlier theological ideas. When the reader reviews the material, several points stand out as similarities and differences between Luther’s anthropologies and salvation schemes in *First Lectures on the Psalms II* and *Lectures on Romans*.

The first of these points is contained within Luther’s anthropology. In his work on the Psalms, Luther makes it very clear that there is both a body and a soul existent in the human person. This dialectic relationship between the soul and body is also present in the later work on Romans. However, a subtle difference arises out of this point. *Lectures on Romans* defines the split between the body and soul in much clearer terms, specifically relegating the soul to a “middle ground.”92 The definitiveness of this distinction gives a better picture of the soul’s relation to the body. Consequently, Luther’s relation between the soul and the body is found to be more lucid in *Lectures on Romans* than in *First Lectures on the Psalms II*.

Another point in his anthropology that is readily compared between the two works is Luther’s view of the state of humanity. The human being remains basely sinful and hopeless in his or her situation. Evident in both works, intervention by God is necessary for the human to have any sort of hope for eternal life. By itself, the human soul is entirely worthless to itself.

Although Luther’s conception of the human soul remains essentially the same between his earlier and later theology, some emphatic changes should be noted. In his

92 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 468
Lecture on the Psalms, Luther is clear with his understanding of the soul as a primarily divine entity. From its ex nihilo creation in First Lectures on Psalms II, the soul in this earlier work has clearer ties to God than is portrayed in Lecture on Romans. This nuance of the divine dwelling within the soul seems to be removed from the text on Romans. Luther places no emphasis on the creation of the soul and thereby skirts any substantial discussion of divine essence within the soul.

A final point to note about the soul is that its function remains the same as Luther’s thought develops. It was clear in First Lectures on Psalms II that the soul exists on two levels: those of pre-salvation and post-salvation. Before salvation, the soul is a God-formed and pure entity existing within “stable” of the body. Because of this captivity within the body, it is functionally limited and cannot fully express its powers. After salvation has been achieved, the soul comes forth from its corporeal prison in such a magnificent way that Luther views it as a rebirth: “And so the soul will live and rise again.” The soul then can fully function with the aid of the Holy Spirit in directing the body and enabling God to work through the human. The mystical theme of ‘rebirth’ is preserved in Luther’s thought, even after other points have shifted away from the mystical tradition.

The soul functions similarly in Lectures on Romans. Before salvation, the soul is a consciousness that reminds the sinful human being of God’s bidding. Other than that, the sinful body plays the central role in anthropology, leaving the soul in an inactive state. However, when salvation has come to a person, the soul plays an essential and

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93 Luther, First Lectures on the Psalms II, 301-302
94 Luther, First Lectures on the Psalms II, 534
95 Luther, Lectures on Romans, 180
central role in the anthropological scheme. As the “mid-portion” between the body and the Holy Spirit, the soul becomes the medium through which God’s actions and message are transmitted.\textsuperscript{96} By this out-flowing from the soul, the saved human being enjoys the benefits of a godly, Spirit-directed life:

Those who live according to the Spirit, men who are born of the Spirit and of God to become new creatures, set their minds on the things of the Spirit.... the wisdom that is, setting one’s mind on, consenting to, and approving the things of the Spirit, of the new man, is [eternal] life, that is, of the soul and before God, and peace, of the heart.\textsuperscript{97}

As Luther suggested in \textit{First Lectures on the Psalms II}, the soul finds full function and purpose after the human being has come to a place of salvation.

Another difference exists within Luther’s salvation scheme: the role of the human being in terms of the action he or she performs. This difference is basic to the entire problem of Luther: his shift in understanding of faith, and his relation to the German mystical tradition. The issue at hand is whether or not the human being is capable of enacting salvation by his own power, either in part or fully. The question that should confront the modern scholar is whether or not Luther, at any point in his life, was in danger of affirming the freedom of the human being to achieve his or her own salvation.

As was discussed in the first section on Luther’s salvation scheme, a humble action seems to draw Luther close to the point of semi-Pelagianism. Human beings can only become saved once they have humbly submitted themselves before their holy God. Does this action have any elements of semi-Pelagianism? To gain an idea of what

\textsuperscript{96} Luther, \textit{Lectures on Romans}, 468
\textsuperscript{97} Luther, \textit{Lectures on Romans}, 68-69
exactly Pelagianism and its lesser form contain, Paul Tillich’s book, *A History of Christian Thought*, is very helpful:

Pelagius wanted to avoid the idea of hereditary sin. Sin is not a universally tragic necessity, but a matter of freedom…. The function of Christ under these circumstances is a double one: to provide the forgiveness of sins in baptism to those who believe, and to give an example of a sinless life not only by avoiding sins but also by avoiding the occasions of sin through asceticism… Grace has no meaning after [baptism] because man is able to do everything himself.98

The crux of Pelagianism is the freedom of humanity to participate in their own salvation through their own works. Semi-Pelagianism is simply a step down in emphasis on human freedom. Semi-Pelagianism holds that human beings are to do the best possible of which they are capable, then God will appropriately award them with salvation.99

In his discussion of the Psalms, Luther does not definitely affirm or deny Pelagianism. As Luther’s discussion of Psalm 107:9 suggests, a person entering into the salvific process must be first aware of his faults and then humble himself completely before God can take action through him. Luther also makes it clear in his work on the Psalms, that any works that are righteous in nature come from not the human being, but God working through the human.100 This distinction seems to remove human beings from having the ability to perform any actions that would come close to achieving salvation, in part or in whole.

The only action that remains to be considered is the humble act that precedes salvation in Luther’s scheme. Because of its placement before salvation, this action

99 Ozment, *Age of Reform*, 233-234
should raise concern. It appears to be necessary for any human being’s salvation and the he or she has to perform it. As a result of this action’s importance, it could be erroneously described as Pelagian, but definitely has several strong taints of semi-Pelagianism.

First, this humble act remains solely the human being’s responsibility. The withdrawal from the world in preparation for the God’s entrance is something that only the human can enact. Luther does not make a clear assertion that God helps or aids this act in any way. Rightfully, he does insist that the knowledge of sinfulness is a requirement for the action, but that is where the action of God ends until the human has completed the act.

Second, the human must have the internal drive to complete the action. Again, drawing from Luther’s comments on Psalm 107, “until a person feels himself empty,” there is no implication, direct or indirect, of God in action in this comment. On the other hand, it does suggest that the action of humbling one’s self must come before the salvific action of God.

However, Luther does not suggest anywhere in the First Lectures on the Psalms II that the action of humility by the human is absolutely necessary for salvation. Other than the two points presented above, any notion of semi-Pelagianism is absent from Luther’s work on the Psalms. So, while the work seems to assert that humble action indeed would place human freedom into control of salvation, it cannot be conclusively affirmed that this is a strong enough assertion to put Luther in danger of semi-Pelagianism.

100 Luther, First Lectures on Psalms II, 32
This problematic humble action, however, is shifted later in the salvific process in Luther’s salvation scheme in *Lectures on Romans*. As he observes in that work, each human being has a responsibility to repay God for the gift of salvation through humility:

To his Creator, whom he has offended, he owes glory and the blamelessness of his life... Therefore he is not able to pay this debt unless he humbles himself into the subjection to all of these elements [God and creation], taking the lowest place, asking nothing for himself among all of these things.\(^{101}\)

The key word in this passage is “owes.” This word implies that humanity is in a state of indebtedness to God. This indebtedness springs from the fact that humanity has already achieved its salvation through the hearing and believing of the Word of God. Owing God humility places the humble action after salvation moving the intellectual humility away from semi-Pelagianism. In fact, Luther asserts in his corollary comments of Romans 5:12, that if an individual takes it upon himself to judge anything, including his own state of being, he is committing a grievous error:

Therefore, whoever realizes that sin is in him, which he must govern, this man will surely fear to become a servant of sin.... For if he judges, he knows that the Lord will say to him, “Why do you judge like a righteous man, when you are unrighteous? And even if you have been righteous, yet because you trust in your own righteousness, you have already polluted it.... Since you set up your sin as righteousness and then boast of it as righteousness.”\(^{102}\)

Therefore, Luther dismisses the intellectual humility that seems to be a necessary human action for his salvation scheme in the *First Lectures on the Psalms II* for two different reasons in his *Lectures on Romans*:

\(^{101}\) Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 411

\(^{102}\) Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 301
- Human beings owe God the action of humility because of salvation, not to achieve the salvation.
- Human beings are incapable of judging themselves to be righteous before or after salvation, and therefore have no basis to come to humility or by their own power.
Chapter Thirteen: Conclusion

At the end of this comparison what can be said about Luther, his understanding of faith, and the German mystical tradition? A couple of important conclusions can be made in comparing the anthropologies and economies of salvation.

The anthropologies of Luther and Tauler are very distinct in nature. Their understandings of the composition of the soul and its relation to the body were significantly unique. Tauler viewed the soul as closely linked to the body. In addition, his soul had a three-part construction that was distinctly defined by functions. Conversely, Luther’s soul was further separated from the body and did not have separate functions clearly ascribed to different parts. In terms of similarities, Luther’s *Lectures on the Psalms* yielded no theological ideas compatible to that of Tauler’s *Sermons*. As was noted in the section of comparison between the two, it convincingly follows that after exposure to Tauler’s positive anthropology, Luther was able to better formulate his own negative anthropology.

The theologians’ economies of salvation are much more like-minded. Luther’s “intellectual humility” is very similar in terms of chronology and function to Tauler’s “clearing of the ground.” The similar nature of these actions is clinched in the fact that they both lead to the idea of spiritual “rebirth” that is shared by both theologians.

These similarities can reasonably lead an individual to believe that Luther’s exposure to the mystical tradition brought about theological similarities in his earlier works. Likewise, it appears that the German mystical tradition most likely gave Luther the concept of “rebirth” and aided in his understanding of the human preparation of the soul for God’s entrance. The mystical tradition displays attributes of a semi-Pelagian
understanding of salvation, such as the human action prior to salvation and the purity of the *gemeute*.

The section comparing Luther’s early thought to his later work on Romans moreover illustrates two points. First, the concept of rebirth that was prevalent in both Tauler and early Luther is still existent in the *Lectures on Romans*. This concept is the only feature of the mystical tradition that remains in Luther’s salvation scheme. The idea of the human beings finding radical new spiritual life is an important concept in Protestant theology. Since the concept of rebirth is coherent with orthodox views, the fact that it does remain in Luther’s theology is not surprising. Second, the intellectual humility that figured prominently in Luther’s *First Lectures on Psalms II* is no longer present. Arguments could be made as to whether or not the concept was simply marginalized or entirely abandoned, but the fact that it is not prominent in *Lectures on the Romans* is sufficient to protect Luther from semi-Pelagianism.

Luther has clearly turned away from one portion of his theology that closely tied him to the German mystical tradition. This doctrinal change is Luther’s important step away from the mystical tradition and any semi-Pelagian elements that it might have been developing in his theology. Humanity’s role in salvation is thus safely placed in a position where *Sola Fide* is the only appropriate and necessary human response to the Good News of the risen Lord.
Works Consulted


