

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

ART. VI.—A DAY AT EISENACH.

THE newspapers of late have made us abundantly aware of a great commotion in Germany regarding Luther, and not in Germany alone, but in other countries likewise, including our own. On the 10th of last November four hundred years had passed since the birth of that wonderful man, and it was inevitable that the coincidence of dates should be carefully noted and celebrated in various ways. This paper may be viewed as a modest contribution towards the commemoration which has circulated, and still continues to circulate, round that day.

The life and work of Luther were so full of varied incident, they have already produced such manifold consequences to the human race, and they suggest so many grave questions for the future, that it is evidently desirable, in a slight endeavour of this kind, to keep within the limits of one topic. Now it so happens that last autumn I spent a day at Eisenach, and that this short opportunity of twenty-four hours has left on my memory a most vivid impression of certain scenes of Luther's life. Eisenach, too, with the Wartburg above, is itself well worthy of description and recollection. Nor can there be any question as to the extreme interest of Luther's connection with these places. His schoolboy days in the town have always had a romantic attraction for students of his biography; and his stay in the castle is, of all passages in his career, the most picturesque, the most definitely isolated, the most central, as certainly it is one of the most instructive.

It will be convenient in the first place to take a slight general glance at the range of country to which the town and castle belong. It was Luther's country in a very emphatic sense, and it has a well-marked character of its own. With this end of description in view, it is useful to join Coburg in our thoughts with Eisenach; and for other reasons, too, as will be seen afterwards, it is an advantage to think of the two places together in connection with the life of Luther. Both in the aspect of these two places and in their relation to the Saxon country around, there is a strong affinity between them. They are similar in size, each containing about 11,000 or 12,000 inhabitants. They both retain also very distinctive German characteristics. This may be seen, for instance, in the features of their modest yet dignified town-halls. Each, again, is entered by a gateway through one of those charming towers which remain in many of the smaller towns of Germany as most interesting memorials of the later part of the Middle

Ages. The difference in the two cases (and such variety is part of the interest of the subject) is in this circumstance, that the entrance-tower of Eisenach terminates in a gable, while that of Coburg has a bell-shaped summit. But especially it is to be noted that each of these towns is surmounted by a lofty hill, on which a fortified castle is erected. Thus Coburg and Eisenach dominate, so to speak, the country that lies between them, and determine much of its character.

The intermediate space of some eighty miles, now intersected, of course, by a well-travelled line of railway, has no very grand or commanding features. As surveyed, indeed, from the lofty eminences of the Wartburg and the Castle of Coburg, from whence Luther at two periods of his life often surveyed them—especially from the Castle of Coburg—the view presents a widespread surface of low hills varied between bare corn-land and dark forests. The valley of the Werra, however, which intervenes between Coburg and Eisenach, is really picturesque, well wooded and beautiful, especially as we come near to the latter. The beauty, too, may be said to be of the domestic kind; for it is especially connected with small towns and villages. Even as seen from the window of the railway carriage this aspect of the country is manifest, particularly as such places are passed as Hildburghausen, Themar, and Meiningen. Still more must this have been manifest in the old days of the carriage roads, and when in 1845, during the happy days of their early married life, our Queen and the Prince Consort travelled by these quiet roads and through these walled towns and red-roofed villages.¹

But for other reasons beyond the mere advantage of obtaining a correct view of natural scenery and human habitation, it is desirable to look well at this tract of country. Historically and biographically such a survey is of great value. The Saxon district of Thuringia has been called "the heart, the warm true heart," of Germany. With our present subject before us, it is worth our while to note that a line running from south-west to north-east from Worms to Wittenberg, two critical scenes of Luther's life, intersect this region symmetrically. But what I have specially before my mind is this, that the district under our attention itself contains three spots having a memorable connection with his biography. These are Möhra, his father's birthplace; Altenstein, from whence Luther was carried off by pretended banditti to the Wartburg; and

See Sir Theodore Martin's "Life of the Prince Consort," vol. i., pp. 282-302. Some excellent illustrations of these German scenes, including both Coburg and Eisenach, are given in Mr. Rimmer's "Early Homes of Prince Albert."

Schmalkalden, where in his mature life the celebrated "Protestant League" was drawn up, which finally defined the Lutheran position, and made reconciliation with the Papacy impossible. A few words may be said on the first and third of these places. The intermediate one need only be touched, for it must be referred to presently again in connection with Eisenach itself.

The village of Möhra lies by the side of a small lake among wooded hills, about eight miles from Eisenach, very near to the railway which now forms the line of communication with Coburg. The name of Möhra itself reveals the character of the "moorland," where Luther's hard-working ancestors lived. These were, as he says himself, "thorough peasants," with farmsteads and cattle, and with a disposition towards mining, for which the neighbourhood gave some facilities. Three families bearing the name of Luther still reside at Möhra; and it is said that some of the present inhabitants of the place bear a striking likeness to the Reformer. It was, as is well known, the prospect of successful copper-mining that took Martin Luther's father to a region far distant from Möhra, so that he was born at Eisleben. But there is a curious interest in remembering that the quiet home of his ancestors was within a few miles of Schmalkalden, where, in conjunction with other noted men of the time, he may be said to have accomplished a religious revolution.¹

This latter place has sometimes been compared to Chester. Its double row of ramparts and the quaint timber framework of its houses constitute a resemblance well worthy of notice; and indeed, anyone who has travelled through the district of Thuringia must have been reminded of Cheshire. Schmalkalden is only a few miles from Meiningen, the most noteworthy station between Coburg and Eisenach. Thus it is only a few miles from Möhra. There Luther met, in 1531, with Melancthon, Spalatin, Bucer, Bugenhagen, and others, in the prospect of the Great Council which was about to be summoned by the Pope; and in the Krone Hotel, which stands in the market-place, signed the articles which hold so memorable a place in the theological history of the Reformation. Melancthon was full of anxiety. "He feared—and not without good reason—a worse than Papal tyranny from rapacious Protestant Princes, who now exercised the power of supreme bishops and little popes in their territories; he sincerely re-

¹ The circumstances of the parentage of the Reformer in connection with Möhra are given in the first chapter of Koestlin's "Life of Luther," a book which well deserves the eulogy of it by Mr. Froude on its first appearance.

gretted the loss, not of the episcopal domination, but of the episcopal administration, as a check upon secular despotism."¹ Luther was absorbed in his deadly opposition to the Papal system. It is touching to add that at Schmalkalden, where he had a most perilous and painful illness, he expressed the earnest hope that he might die in the territory of the Elector to whom he owed so much.

Intermediate in date between the events which mark these early and late reminiscences as connected with the life of Luther, was the adventure which took place near the Castle of Altenstein—as Altenstein itself is intermediate between Möhra and Schmalkalden. But, as I have said, the event and the place need only here be named; for they must be mentioned more particularly afterwards. It is now time that I should give some slight description of Eisenach and of the Wartburg, and of the time spent by Luther in each.

Eisenach nestles in the most intimate manner round the base of the steep wooded hill which rises up to the high eminence of the Wartburg. In itself it is an admirable specimen of an unchanged German town; so that, when I wandered through its open spaces and its streets, I felt convinced that I saw around me, on the whole, what Martin Luther saw on his various visits to this, "his beloved town." One of these open spaces is entered immediately on coming through the above-mentioned tower-gateway. It is large in extent and triangular in form, and must, I imagine, have always been what it is at present. Here stands, close to the gateway, so that its Romanesque tower is combined along with it in one view, St. Nicholas' Church, the older of the two sacred buildings of the place, though probably the less important.² From this space—the modern name of which is the Karlsplatz—but which the old fashioned inhabitants still call the "Sonnenbendsmarkt," or "Saturday-market"—parallel streets conduct us to the chief open space of the city, which is the principal market-place, and has the name of "Mittwochsmarkt," or "Wednesday-market." Here stand the Town Hall and the Grand Duke's Palace at right angles to one another. Here especially stands St. George's Church, a large edifice without a tower. It is this church, most probably, that is to be closely connected with sundry incidents in the life of Luther. In front of it is one of those conspicuous fountains which give life and animation to the market-squares of Germany. This fountain associates itself with the church by having figures of

¹ See Professor Schaff's "Creeds of Christendom," vol. i. p 253.

² There are two other churches in Eisenach, but they are subordinate in interest.

St. George and the Dragon placed high in the midst of it. One very pleasing feature of the market-place is found in the collection of lime-trees near the church; and, if I am not mistaken, we have in these very trees a memorial of Luther. They are by no means very old; and I find that in 1817—the 31st of October—the anniversary of the nailing of the “Theses” on the church-doors at Wittenberg three hundred years before—lime-trees were planted at Eisenach. Certain it is that the commemoration of 1817 was very heartily observed here, as in other parts of Germany.¹

It may be well now to turn at once to the Wartburg: nor in so doing are we really offending against the course of the biography; for when Luther was a schoolboy at Eisenach, he must often have wandered up the woods to the Castle, and listened to the song of the birds and gathered strawberries, as he did afterwards when he was a prisoner there in mature manhood. The upper part of this Castle has excellent and dignified Romanesque arcades, dating from the early part of the twelfth century. This architecture has been admirably restored by the Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar, so that one who has had experience of restorative work could imagine that Sir Gilbert Scott's hand had been engaged upon it. Round the lower part of the Castle are buildings of various periods, grouped together in most picturesque forms. The whole is an eloquent memorial of successive periods of history: and, though certainly the associations of the modern tourist in this scene are somewhat obtrusive, it is easy to separate from them the nobler thoughts which the place suggests; and, after all, we ought not to grudge to Germany the opportunity of visiting freely one of the temporary homes of a hero of their nationality and their religion. The appearance and the furniture of Luther's room in the Wartburg have been so often described, that this subject may be passed by. But my attention was caught by two objects there, for which I was not prepared. These were admirable portraits by Cranach of the father and mother of Luther, which the Grand Duke has, with a true instinct, placed in that room. It is a great help in studying here the stormy part of the life of Luther to recall his earliest childhood, and to note what we have been able to learn of his parents. Certainly they were severe. It was the fashion of that day. He says of himself, in referring to his earliest experience at home, that “in punishing children the apple should be placed beside the rod, and they should not be chastised for an offence about nuts or cherries as if they had broken open a money-box.” Yet Hans Luther

¹ I have lately had an opportunity of consulting one of the memorial books published in Germany at that time.

and his wife were good and godly, as they were energetic and laborious. We read of the father as praying by the bedside of his son, and the mother had the admiration and respect of all her neighbours as an example of womanly excellence.

These parents sent young Martin Luther to school at Eisenach. They had relations there. In fact he said afterwards in one of his letters, "Isenacum pene totam parentelam meam habet." One of these relations appears to have been the sexton of St. George's Church; and through him it is probable that he made very early and familiar acquaintance with all parts of that building, within which his voice afterwards preached very startling doctrine. Not far from the church is the site of the school where young Martin was taught well in Latin and in the other learning of the day. The building has been lately renovated, so that its ancient form has been lost; but a statue of Luther prominently placed on its front asserts that this is the place where the stern Trebonius used to take off his hat and bow to the pupils every day when he came into the school. "Who knows," he said, "that there are not in this school some whom God will raise to the rank of burgo-masters, chancellors, and doctors?" Trebonius could have no power of imagining how great a rank in the annals of mankind one of those pupils was destined to attain. On the opposite side of the market-square, in an obscure corner, the house is shown where good Madame Cotta, touched by the sweet voice of young Martin, when singing in the streets for bread, gave him a home—and not the house only, but the very room where he pursued his studies under this gentle patronage, and the cupboard where the boy slept. The kindly influence of this excellent woman was the corrective and complement of the harsh discipline of Trebonius, and probably exercised a strong controlling power over Luther's future character. It was the recollection of Madame Cotta which led to his memorable saying, "There is nothing sweeter than the heart of a pious woman." Luther never forgot his early days at Eisenach—never was ashamed of his poverty, his struggles, and of his singing hymns from door to door. "I too," he said, "was one of those young colts, particularly at Eisenach, my beloved town."

J. S. HOWSON.

(To be continued.)
