

Martin Luther and the Letters of Cicero

In what appear to be some of his very last words, written just two days before his death, Martin Luther makes mention of Cicero's letters: *Ciceronem in epistolis nemo integre intellexit...* (WA TR 5,317-8). Luther suggests that the letters of Cicero will be impossible to be read intelligently "unless one has been involved in the governance of some major state for twenty years." That the German reformer of the church should have the Roman rhetor on his mind at the end of his life is not, in and of itself, so remarkable. After all, Cicero was the ancient Latin prose author whom Luther most frequently quoted throughout his life. Indeed, he had long admired this "wisest" of the Romans, going so far as to express his hope that God would show the pagan Cicero some sort of special consideration in the life to come (see WA TR 3,4; 4,14). Building upon previous scholarly work on Luther's last written words by Kytzler and Bayer, I will address in this paper the specific question of why Luther would concentrate his attention here on Cicero's letters, as opposed to his other writings or his orations.

Drawing on comments about Cicero that Luther makes throughout his writings but especially in his "Table Talks," I will argue that Luther held Cicero in such high regard not simply because he was a talented public speaker or a thoughtful philosopher, but rather because he represented in his own self the perfect union of *verba* and *res* (eloquence and substance). Aristotle and other philosophers, in Luther's mind, were fatally associated with the idea that the contemplative life is more conducive for the pursuit of virtue than the active life. Luther's Cicero, by contrast, was a "man full of cares and civil duties," who far surpassed "the lazy ass Aristotle, who had plenty of money and leisure." Even though Cicero could not match the Greek Aristotle's originality or brilliance as a dialectician precisely because he was so distracted by all

of his civic duties, nonetheless it was the busy and bravely outspoken Roman who was the better representative, for Luther, of “genuine philosophy” (WA TR 2,456) as applied to real life.

Of course, Cicero’s letters were not always “literary,” nor invariably written in what many Renaissance humanists considered to be proper “Ciceronian” style. Rather they were pointed rhetorical vehicles which this powerful statesman used to wield his personal and political will. (Luther’s own Latin prose style was not always all that “Ciceronian,” either.) But what better place than Cicero’s informative, chatty, and sometimes urgent correspondence to observe this wise and busy man who craved to be at the center of the political stage, where he could use his command of language to the advantage of the *res publica*, to teach, delight, and move his fellow citizens? Cicero had been actively engaged in the governance of the Roman state for years, even decades; he had not just talked or written about how best to do so from a purely theoretical perspective. To this deep involvement his letters give ample and varied testimony.

That Luther himself spent much of his own energy, especially in the second half of his career, administering an emerging church body and overseeing its complex, daily affairs, often through the medium of the letter, may help to explain his personal interest in Cicero’s letters at the end of his life. That this influential reformer gave his weighty blessing to their study may also go a long way to explain the inclusion of Cicero’s letters in the long lived school curricula developed by early Lutheran educators, contemporary with and later than Luther, such as Philipp Melanchthon and Johann Sturm.

Bibliography

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[abbr. above as WA TR].

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