

The Reformer as Father—Luther and his Son (1530 and 1537 [?])

Abstract

Johann (Hans) (1526–75) was the eldest of six children born to the reformer Martin Luther and his wife Katharina (who also reared four orphans). He was twenty years old when his father died in 1546. After leaving the university, Hans made a profession of the law. Below are two letters from his father. Martin Luther sent the first letter, written in German, to his son in Wittenberg when the latter was only four years old. The letter was sent from Coburg Castle, where Luther lived during the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. His purpose in writing the letter was to encourage his son to be diligent in his studies. Woven into the letter is a description of a wonderful garden that is open to studious children. The date and place of origin of the second letter, this time in Latin, are contested. It was composed when Hans was at least eleven but no older than seventeen. The second letter follows the same lines as the earlier one, expressing pleasure at Hans's diligence and progress. Luther also encourages Hans to be dutiful in his obedience to God's will, which blesses diligence and curses disobedient children.

Source

1. Martin Luther to his Son Johannes [Hänschen]

[Coburg Castle] June 19, 1530

To my dearly beloved son Hänschen Luther at Wittenberg,

Grace and peace in Christ! My dearly beloved son, it pleases me to hear that you are studying well and praying diligently. Do this, my son, and keep it up. When I come home, I will bring you a nice gift from the fair. I know a pretty, lovely, pleasant garden, where many children go; they wear golden coats and gather nice apples, pears, cherries, and plums from under the trees; they sing, jump, and are merry. They also have pretty little horses with golden bridles and silver saddles. I asked the owner of the garden: "Whose children are these?" He said: "These are the children who like to pray, study, and be pious." So I said: "My dear sir, I also have a son, his name is Hänschen Luther. Might he not come into the garden, too, so that he might also eat such lovely apples and pears, ride such fine horses, and play with these children?" Then the man said: "If he likes to pray, study, and be pious, then he, too, may enter the garden. Lippus [Melanchthon] and Jost [Jonas] as well. And if they all come together, they will also get whistles and drums, lutes, and all kinds of stringed instruments; they will also dance and shoot with small crossbows." And he showed me a lovely lawn, all ready for dancing, where golden whistles and drums and fine silver crossbows hung. But it was still early, so the children hadn't eaten yet, which is why I couldn't wait for the dancing and said to the man: "Ah, dear Sir, I must hurry off and write all this to my dear son Hänschen, so that he will be sure to study diligently, pray well, and be pious, so that he, too, may come into this garden. But he has an Aunt Lena, whom he must bring as well." The man said: "That he can, go and write him thus."

Therefore, my dear son Hänschen, make sure to study and pray, and tell Lippus and Justen to do the same, so that they may study and pray, too. That way, all of you will get into the garden together. May you be herewith commended to God, and greet Aunt Lena and give her a kiss for me.

Your dear father

Martinus Luther

Source of original German text: “Luther an seinen Sohn Hänschen. [Veste Koburg,] 19. Juni 1530,” in *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. Weimarer Ausgabe (Sonderedition). Part 3: Briefwechsel. Vol. 5, pp. 377–78. Available online at: Carl Alfred Hase (ed.), *275 Luther-Briefe: in Auswahl und Übersetzung* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1878), 224–25, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nnc1.1002649683>.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

2. Martin Luther to his Son Johannes

January 27, 1537 (?)

Grace and peace in the Lord. So far, my dearest son, your studies and the letters you have written me have pleased me. If you continue this way, you will not only give joy to me, your father, who loves you, but you will above all do benefit to yourself, by not creating the impression that you are cut from a different cloth than the rest of your family. Therefore take care to diligently advance that which you have started. For God, who has commanded children to obey their parents, has also promised his blessing to obedient children. See to it that you set your sights solely on this blessing, and do not let yourself be diverted from it by bad examples. For the same God has also threatened disobedient children with a curse. Therefore, fear God, the blessing and the cursing God, who, though he may postpone his promises and threats for the destruction of the wicked, fulfills them quickly for the salvation of the good. Therefore, fear God and listen to your parents, who surely want only the best for you, and flee from shameful and dishonorable company. Your Mother greets you heartily; Aunt Lena does too, likewise your sisters and brothers, all of whom also wish you good progress and a happy conclusion to your studies. Mother asks you to greet your teacher and his wife. Also, should they wish to be here with you for Shrovetide, that is, during these joyous days, then that is fine, as I will be away then. Aunt Lena very much asks that they come. Farewell, my son, and study and listen to the admonitions of good people. May the Lord be with you. Given on Saturday after the Conversion of Paul 1537.

Martinus Luther,

Your father in body and spirit

Source: The letter was originally written in Latin. For the Latin original, please see “Luther an seinen Sohn Johannes. [Wittenberg,] 27. Januar 1537 (?),” in *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. Weimarer Ausgabe (Sonderedition). Part 3: *Briefwechsel*. Vol. 8, pp. 18–20.

Translation: This English translation by Thomas Dunlap is based on the German version published as, “An seinen Sohn Johannes. 27. Januar 1537 (?)” in Martin Luther, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, Vol. 6, Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1995, pp. 180–81.

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