

Martin Greschat

Martin Bucer

Ein Reformator und seine Zeit, 1491–1551, München: Beck 1990, 308 S., ISBN 3-406-34610-3, Ln. DM 78,-

History has not been much kinder to Martin Bucer than his own contemporaries, who variously described him as a liar, a hypocrite and a man of few principles – and these were the supporters of the Reformation! Bucer's contribution to the Reformation is difficult to define: he has left no systematic theology and, unlike Bullinger and Calvin, was never able to secure a firm base where he could implement his polity. As one of the first generation reformers, Bucer was in contact with most of the leading politicians and churchmen of this time; he has, however, been overshadowed by those with whom he worked or debated, making him a particularly difficult subject for a biography.

Professor Greschat takes the reader on a journey from Bucer's youth in Sélestat, of which little is known, through to his death in Cambridge in 1551. The balance of biographical narrative and historical background, however, prompts the most troubling question about this book, for whom is it intended? Bucer's life and theological positions are clearly laid out, but the background is selective, and is generally used to emphasize certain aspects of Bucer's work. One finds virtually nothing on the relationship between Strasbourg and the Swiss Confederation, little on Calvin and Bucer, and an insufficient amount on the political machinations in Strasbourg under Sturm to explain why Bucer had to leave. There is a curious imbalance between the clarity with which Bucer's ideas are explained and the chary manner in which the author treats the reformer's colleagues and opponents. The reason for this is that this book tends towards hagiography; it is a spirited defence of Bucer the champion of church unity and a repudiation of the lingering charges of opportunism and theological vagueness.

In contrast to Greschat's absorbing account of Bucer's early years, his treatment of Bucer's work in Strasbourg is disappointing. Names, events and places swirl past with all too little interpretation, and the forty pages devoted to this period are insufficient for any but the most informed of readers to make much sense of it. Men such as Wolfgang Capito, Matthias Zell and the two Sturms are duly acknowledged, but remain colourless one dimensional figures, whose relationships to Bucer are left wholly unexplored. On the Eucharistic debate between Luther and Zwingli, Professor's Greschat's analysis of Bucer's independent position is helpful, though there is little to suggest that Luther and Zwingli were not justified in regarding the Strasbourger's manoeuvres with considerable suspicion.

Bucer's role in the Swiss Reformation was crucial. Until 1537, Bucer's theology clearly had more in common with Zürich than Wittenberg, and he

worked hard to preserve Zwinglian theology in the southern German cities. Nevertheless, Professor Greschat is more concerned to emphasize Bucer's independence from Zwingli, an independence that Zwingli himself understood as Lutheranism and which led to an ending of their friendship. Indeed, Bucer managed to earn the enmity of all parties as he and Capito travelled extensively through Germany and Switzerland in search of concord – although Capito's work is hardly mentioned. Despite all this, Bucer's book on the Eucharist (1534) won praise from such diverse persons as Luther, Bullinger, Myconius, Haller, Melanchthon and Osiander, though all of these men remained suspicious of his motives. Here would have been an excellent opportunity to examine how these other men understood Bucer. How did they read his text? How was it possible that Bullinger, Luther and Osiander could find something in common to praise?

In Wittenberg, after considerable effort, Bucer managed to convince Luther of his sincerity, and the subsequent theological agreement brought the Strasbourg one of his few joyous moments. Flushed with enthusiasm Bucer went to the Swiss hopeful of achieving the long-awaited reconciliation. The agreement was, of course, scuttled by the Swiss; not, as Professor Greschat suggests, because they were smugly content with their own positions (an argument wholly unfair to Bullinger), but because they simply could not understand how the man who had played such an important role at Bern in 1528 could seemingly sell out to the Lutheran camp. Professor Greschat shares with his subject the tendency to overlook the fact that the Swiss and the Lutherans truly regarded one another as being in error.

Bucer received numerous invitations following his expulsion from Strasbourg, but he chose to go to England, where his reputation ensured him a warm reception. These final years were painful for Bucer as he realised that he no longer played an important role in church reform. He died in exile having seen few of his dreamed of reforms realised, and the unedifying story of his exhumation under the Mary was the final insult, though by then he had found the peace which he always believed possible in this world.

This book, with its sympathetic account of Bucer's life, reminds us of how important and interesting this man was. There is much in this book which challenges us to reconsider our understanding of Martin Bucer. It is, however, hagiographical and apologetic in tone. What is required is an assessment of Martin Bucer as reformer and theologian in relation to his times and colleagues. For that we must wait.

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