It may come as something of a surprise, even to the relatively well-informed student of European history and culture, that the ecclesiastical reformer whose name is so closely associated with the phrase “sola scriptura” had the highest respect for stories attributed to a pagan author, assigning them a status second only to the Bible and regarding them as wiser than “the harmful opinions of all the philosophers.” In fact, Martin Luther told and retold the fables of Aesop throughout his life, strongly supported their continued use in Lutheran homes and schools, and at one point in his life actually set out to prepare an edition of Aesop in German.

While the avid interest of so many of his humanist contemporaries in collecting, analyzing, editing, and translating the works of pagan Greek and Roman authors has been the subject of extensive research, the significance of Luther’s deep devotion to Aesop, including the effort he put into preparing an edition of his fables, has not yet been fully considered. Although Luther never did finish the project he began while staying in Coburg in 1530, there is an autograph of the work in the Vatican Library which contains the author’s own corrected versions of thirteen Aesopic fables, accompanied by appropriate proverbs and maxims. In addition to the fables themselves, we also have Luther’s prefatory remarks to what may be called the “Coburg Collection.” And there are also his not-infrequent references to the fables and their author in his sermons, lectures, commentaries, treatises, letters, and table conversation. Taken together, these sources give us a fairly complete picture of which Aesopic fables Luther knew, how he understood and used them, and why he valued them so.

While Luther’s unfinished edition of Aesop’s fables has received a fair amount of attention over the last hundred years or so, most of it has come from industrious German scholars who have done a great deal of the painstaking philological work necessary to establish a fixed text. It is not my intention here to duplicate the efforts of Ernst Thiele, Willi Steinberg, Reinhard Dithmar, and others, but rather to build upon the solid foundation they have laid.

Luther’s fascination with Aesop needs to be set in wider and longer cultural contexts. While these ancient fables are relatively simple compositions, Luther applies them to a variety of contemporary issues, with broad moral, theological, literary,
sociopolitical, and even economic implications. He makes them his own. All the same, we must remember that the amount of time separating Luther from Aesop is measured not in decades but in millennia. The continuities and discontinuities that connect and separate the two will be a dynamic that engages us throughout this book. It is hoped that such a synchronic and diachronic contextualization will help a broader reading public to begin to appreciate Luther’s appreciation of Aesop.

Much of what Luther has to say about Aesop, including his own retellings of the fables in Latin or German (or a combination of the two), has yet to be rendered into English. The second through the fifth chapters, therefore, include my own fairly close translations of all of the relevant passages. While these are not intended to be literary recreations by any means, it is nonetheless my hope that they flow smoothly and do not sound too wooden to the ear of the general reader.

It has been said “that Luther’s use of language is so powerful that one is tempted simply to quote him,” so in the notes I have supplied the Latin or German for all those passages directly connected with Aesop and the Aesopic fable. This should facilitate easier consultation and comparative analysis for more scholarly readers. (Space constraints preclude the inclusion of the original texts for the other quotations.) The appendices offer scholars the chance to consult texts of other relevant materials, such as the first printed version of Luther’s fables (Jena, 1557) or Steinhöwel’s fifteenth-century version of the same, in their original languages.

This book should shed light on Luther’s “world of thought” as set in the context of early modern Europe, particularly his relationship with the classical tradition and the role Aesop’s fables played in the educational program of the Lutheran Reformation. Luther’s contributions are rarely, if ever, mentioned in studies of the Aesopic fables; however, Luther was interested not only in the fables themselves, but also in the legendary life of Aesop, and he raised a number of critical questions concerning the authorship of the fables. Examining Luther’s studies of Aesop should open another chapter in the history of the richly ambiguous relationship between the classics and Christianity, providing thereby a partial answer to the memorable question posed by Tertullian about what “Athens” might possibly have to do with

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1. See Noonan, *Aesop & the CEO*, for a recent attempt to apply “powerful business lessons” from Aesop to the corporate world.

2. Where there are preexisting translations of such passages, as, for instance, in the American edition of Luther’s works (LW), I have permitted my own, especially in chapter 2, to be guided by them, when possible.

3. For this reference, see Maxfield, *Luther’s Lectures on Genesis*, 5. I have also included a number of passages from Luther’s works that are not directly related to Aesop in this volume, many of them in chapter 1; for these, for the most part, I have simply used existing translations, as indicated.

4. Bornkamm’s *Luther’s World of Thought* provides a general introduction to Luther’s ideas in their early modern European context.
“Jerusalem.” While this question first arose during the period of late antiquity, it remained a pertinent question well into the early modern period, and it continues to preoccupy many still today. Luther has much more to contribute to this discussion than is often assumed. His well-known opposition to pagan thinkers such as Aristotle and Epicurus did not extend to the entire classical tradition. He was extremely fond of authors like Cicero, Virgil, and, as we shall see, Aesop.

The first chapter consists of preliminary considerations of Luther’s relationship with the Greco-Roman classical tradition in general. The second examines his knowledge, use, and evaluation of Aesop’s fables throughout the course of his life and work. The third chapter considers Luther’s work as an editor of Aesop, paying special attention to the preface he wrote for the 1530 collection, which includes his most extensive thoughts on the person and work of Aesop and the value of his fables. The fourth offers searching (if not exhaustive) analyses of the narrative and didactic strategies Luther uses to tell and explain each of the fables included in the Coburg Collection. The final chapter studies Luther as a “fabulist” in his own right, examines the non-Aesopic fables he told and retold (including some of his own composition), and explores the question of his possible influence on later fable tellers and fable theorists, especially in Germany.

One of the challenges for any scholar who dares to venture far into the field of Luther studies is the daunting challenge that the vast bibliography associated with his name represents. Luther himself wrote voluminously (there are over one hundred thick volumes in the “Weimar edition” of his works). To compound the problem, more has been written about Luther, as Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out, than any other figure in the history of the Christian church, except for Jesus Christ. While I have tried here to give some account of the research devoted specifically to Luther and his relationship with the classical tradition, especially the fables of Aesop, this book does not claim to have penetrated all of the areas of scholarship on Luther that might have some relevance for this study. Nor is it my intention here to offer the reader more than a glimpse into the rapidly growing body of scholarship devoted to Aesop and the European fable tradition. This said, the notes do offer a goodly number of references to other scholarly works that may prove helpful to the reader who wishes to pursue this topic in greater depth.

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5. On the early period, see among others, Cochrane, Christianity and Classical Culture; Jaeger, Early Christianity and Greek Paideia; and Pelikan, Christianity and Classical Culture.

6. Pelikan, Melody of Theology, 154.

7. There are over 1,400 bibliographical entries in Carnes, Fable Scholarship.
audiences at a conference on “The Word and the World” at Pepperdine University in 2006, the congress of the International Association for Neo-Latin Studies in Budapest in the same year, and the International Conference on the Ancient Novel in Lisbon of 2008. The proceedings of the last mentioned will include an earlier version of the first section of chapter 5. Wolfgang Haase, editor of the *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, has actively encouraged my interest in Luther’s relationship to the classics. The first chapter draws on several articles on Luther’s adaptation of the poetry of Virgil and Martial that first appeared in the pages of *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*. My thanks as well to Michael Albrecht for his warm encouragement along the way and for allowing me to adapt for use in this book material on Luther and Aesop that had previously appeared in *Logia*.8

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