The Reformation

Martin Luther’s criticisms of the Catholic Church grew sharper over time. Some Catholics, in turn, responded with personal attacks on Luther. In recent times, historians have focused less on the theological and personal issues connected with the Reformation. Instead, many modern scholars analyze the political, social, and economic conditions that contributed to the Reformation.

**A PRIMARY SOURCE**

**Martin Luther**

In 1520, Martin Luther attacked the whole system of Church government and sent the pope the following criticism of the Church leaders who served under him in Rome.

The Roman Church has become the most licentious [sinful] den of thieves. . . . They err who ascribe to thee the right of interpreting Scripture, for under cover of thy name they seek to set up their own wickedness in the Church, and, alas, through them Satan has already made much headway under thy predecessors. In short, believe none who exalt thee, believe those who humble thee.

**B SECONDARY SOURCE**

**Steven Ozment**

In 1992, historian Steven Ozment published *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution*. Here, he comments on some of the political aspects of the Reformation.

Beginning as a protest against arbitrary, self-aggrandizing, hierarchical authority in the person of the pope, the Reformation came to be closely identified in the minds of contemporaries with what we today might call states’ rights or local control. To many townspeople and villagers, Luther seemed a godsend for their struggle to remain politically free and independent; they embraced his Reformation as a conserving political force, even though they knew it threatened to undo traditional religious beliefs and practices.

**C SECONDARY SOURCE**

**G. R. Elton**

In *Reformation Europe*, published in 1963, historian G. R. Elton notes the role of geography and trade in the spread of Reformation ideas.

Could the Reformation have spread so far and so fast if it had started anywhere but in Germany? The fact that it had its beginnings in the middle of Europe made possible a very rapid radiation in all directions. . . . Germany’s position at the center of European trade also helped greatly. German merchants carried not only goods but Lutheran ideas and books to Venice and France; the north German Hanse [a trade league] transported the Reformation to the Scandinavian countries.

**D PRIMARY SOURCE**

**Hans Brosamer**

“Seven-Headed Martin Luther” (1529) The invention of the printing press enabled both Protestants and Catholics to engage in a war of words and images. This anti-Luther illustration by German painter Hans Brosamer depicted Martin Luther as a seven-headed monster—doctor, monk, infidel, preacher, fanatic swarmed by bees, self-appointed pope, and thief Barabbas from the Bible.