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***Deus Ludens*: God at Play in Luther's Theology**

Christopher Boyd Brown

Does God play games? The fear that God might play games is at the root of the anxieties of the modern world. Descartes sought certainty in the face of the possibility that God might play tricks—the *deus deceptor*—and his opponents, solid Dutch Calvinist theologians, accused him of blasphemy for suggesting that such a thing was possible.¹ Albert Einstein famously objected to quantum mechanics by insisting that “God does not play at dice with the universe.” Apart from epistemology or physical science, Enlightenment thinkers rejected the Christian God on moral grounds, insisting that God had to act according to our own, rationally discerned rules. The roots of this seemingly modern anxiety go far back into medieval and late antique philosophy and theology.

For Luther, however, God is a God who plays games: *Deus ludens*.

This theme of God's play, God's game, has received attention as an element in Luther's Genesis lectures, as explored by Ulrich Asendorf and recently by John Maxfield and by S.J. Munson.² It is a motif that helps to frame some of the central structures of Luther's theology: the masks of God, law and gospel, God as Father, and the incarnation itself.

This essay seeks to elucidate Luther's theology of God's play not only on the basis of the Genesis lectures,³ but across Luther's work, especially in Luther's *Annotations on Matthew*, the advice on preaching Matthew's Gospel written down

¹ Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 117f.

² Ulrich Asendorf, *Lectura in Biblia: Luthers Genesisvorlesung (1535–1545)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998); John Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2008); S. J. Munson, “The Divine Game: Faith and the Reconciliation of Opposites in Luther's Lectures on Genesis,” *CTQ* 76 (2012): 89–115. See also David Terry, “Martin Luther on the Suffering of the Christian” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1990), 379–84; Jane E. Strohl, “Luther and the Word of Consolation,” *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 67 (Winter 1987): 24–26.

³ Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” (1535–45/1544–54), in vols. 1–8 of *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter *AE*. The original Latin text is edited in vols. 42–44 of *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 73 vols. in 85 (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–), hereafter *WA*.

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by the Reformer for one of his students in 1534–1535, which was published in 2015 in English translation by Concordia Publishing House.⁴

The vocabulary of play in Luther's Latin and German

In Luther's Latin and German, the vocabulary of "play" and "games" (*ludus-ludere, Spiel-spielen*) has a considerable range of meanings. *Ludere*, especially in compound forms, can mean to make sport of, to mock or deceive, "to play games" with someone or something, and can mean not to take it seriously.⁵ Both the Latin and German verbs can mean to play on stage—an important facet of Luther's use of the category of "play" in his Genesis lectures, in which he analyzes stories of the patriarchs according to the structures of classical drama.⁶ Allied to this meaning of "play" is play with masks, such as were worn in German towns at Carnival, in which the wearer pretends to be someone else, or a member of a class to which he did not belong.⁷ Luther's well-known language of God's "masks"—the *larva Dei* behind which God conceals himself as he acts—draws on this.⁸ *Ludere* can also refer to sexual play,⁹ as in the behavior of the Israelites before the golden calf (Exod 32:6), or the "play" of Isaac and Rebecca which reveals to king Abimelech that they are not in fact brother and sister (Gen 26:7).

Ludus or *Spiel* can also mean a game with rules.¹⁰ Luther perceived that games of this kind were characteristic of his age. In a Table Talk of January 1537, Luther observed that

Games with cards and dice are common, for our age has invented many games. Surely there has been a reaction. In my youth all games were prohibited; makers of cards and musicians at dances weren't admitted to the sacraments, and people were required to make confession of their gaming, dancing, and

⁴ Luther, "Annotations on Matthew 1–18" (1534–35/1538), AE 67:1–328 (WA 38:443–667).

⁵ Charlton Thomas Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary, Founded on Andrews' Ed. of Freund's Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), "ludo" II.F, II.C, II.G, I, II.D.

⁶ See, e.g. Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–45/1544–54), AE 5:113; 7:364–67 (WA 43:506, 44:571–73).

⁷ Jacob Grimm, ed., *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1984), s.v. "Larve" 3.

⁸ For discussion of the *larva Dei* in terms of God's play, see Anthony J. Steinbronn, "The Masks of God: the Significance of Larvae Dei in Luther's Theology," STM thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, IN, 1991.

⁹ "to sport amorously": P.G.W. Glare, ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) [hereafter "OLD"], s.v. "ludo" 4.

¹⁰ OLD, s.v. "ludus" 1.b.

jousting. Today these things are the vogue, and they are defended as exercises for the mind.¹¹

Among games of this sort, Luther is familiar with dice and with cards.¹² His biographer Johann Mathesius describes him as a skilled chess player who once played with students as an honorable diversion at carnival time, and Luther alludes to chess in his writings.¹³ Perhaps most often Luther refers to the ancient European game of Mills known in English as Nine-Men's-Morris. Especially the papacy is described as playing its opponents into a "double mill" in which no matter what the opponents do, the pope has them his trap.¹⁴

Luther also knows about games among children, especially those which involve set words or chants. He accuses Erasmus, for example, of playing "hide and seek" in the debate over free choice.¹⁵ The papal theologians with their doctrine of the *clavis errans* are playing a game of blindman's bluff (*der blinden kue*).¹⁶

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Luther knows of a kind of unstructured play, especially between parents and children, that may involve several of the elements already mentioned, especially words or masks—especially a kind of pretending which then gives way to the revelation of reality. Luther tells an anecdote from his student days that embodies some of these dynamics:

The same thing happens to us that formerly happened to me in my boyhood and to my companions with whom I used to gather contributions for our support during our student days. For when at the time of the celebration of Christ's birthday in the church we were singing in four voices from door to door in the villages the usual songs about the boy Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, it happened by chance that we came to a country house situated in

¹¹ Luther, "Table Talk recorded by Anthony Lauerbach and Jerome Weller" (1536–1537), AE 54:221–222, WA TR 3:377, no. 3526a: "*Chartiludia. Ludus chartiludii et tesserae est frequentissimus. Nam varios ludos invenit hoc saeculum. Sie hat warlich woll geloset! Me adolescente prohibebantur omnes ludi, als das man charten macher, pfeiffer nicht ließ zum sacrament gehen, et cogebantur de husu et saltatione et hastiludii spectaculo confessionem facere. Itzundt gehet es in hohen schwangk. Defendunt talia pro exercitiis ingenii.*"

¹² See, for example, Luther's extended satire on the papal council based on the German card game *Karnöffel*: *Eine Frage des ganzen heiligen Ordens der Kartenspieler vom Karnöffel* (1537), WA 50:131–34.

¹³ Johann Mathesius, *Luthers Leben in Predigten*, Georg Loesche, ed., Bibliothek deutscher Schriftsteller aus Böhmen 9, 2nd ed. (Prague: J. G. Calve/Josef Koch, 1906), 430–431. For allusions to chess, see, e.g., Luther, "Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser" (1521), AE 39:211 (WA 7:677); Luther, "Notes on Ecclesiastes" (1526), AE 15:40 (WA 20:47).

¹⁴ E.g., Luther, "Annotations on Matthew 1–18" (1534–35/1538), AE 67:203 (WA 38:562).

¹⁵ Luther, "Bondage of the Will" (1525), AE 33:111 (WA 18:667).

¹⁶ Luther, "The Keys" (1530), AE 40:343 (WA 30/2:479).

a lonely spot on the outermost borders of a village. When the farmer had heard us singing, he came out of the house and asked in a boorish voice where we were. “Where are you, you rascals?” he asked. At the same time he brought out sausages which he intended to give us. But at the sound of these words we became so terrified that we all scattered, although we knew no reason at all for our terror, and the farmer was offering the sausages with the greatest goodwill. . . . Finally, however, he called us back from our flight; and we laid our fear aside, ran up, and took the contribution he was handing us.¹⁷

The farmer was trying to frighten the boys, but it was only a game, and really he intended their good. Or we might think, for example, of a father who lumbers around pretending to be a hungry bear, to the combined sheer terror and equally sheer delight of his children. Luther specifically defends this kind of play in the Genesis lectures, against the critique that it is immoral as a kind of lying. Having defended the obliging lie, which protects the neighbor, Luther goes on:

The third kind is the playful lie [*iocosum*], when one jests with a person and yet preserves propriety, godliness, and faith. This is like the fun Isaac and Rebecca had, or when a husband plays with or fools his wife or little son. When this trick is discovered, it makes them laugh and be gay. Then the lie ends, and there is nothing but laughter or fun. This is also a useful lie, especially among those who are closely acquainted and are friends.¹⁸

It is this kind of play within the household which seems most to shape Luther’s treatment of God’s play, and perhaps to shape Lutheran perspectives on the household and family life as well.

¹⁷ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis” (1535–45/1544–54), AF 7:335 (WA 44:548): “*Atque idem nobis accidit, quod olim puero mihi et sodalibus meis, cum quibus stipem colligere solebam, unde nos et studia nostra sustentarem. Cum enim eo tempore, quo in Ecclesia natalis Christi celebratur, in pagis ostiatim decantarem quatuor vocibus carmina usitata de puero Iesu nato in Bethlehem, forte contigit, ut ad villam quandam in loco solo et extremis finibus pagi cuiusdam sitam accederem. Inde prodibat rusticus, cum exaudisset canentes et agresti voce querebat ubi essemus. Wo seit jr, jr puben? proferens simul farcimina, quae erat donaturus. Nos vero ad sonum horum verborum ita expavimus, ut diffugeremus omnes, quanquam nullam prorsus causam pavoris sciremus et rusticus summa voluntate offerret farcimina, nisi forte animi assiduis minis et crudelitate magistrorum, quantum in scholasticos saevire solebant, percussi, facilius repentino terrore concuterentur. Tandem vero revocavit fugientes ac nos amotu metu accurrimus, stipemque accepimus, quam porrigebat.*”

¹⁸ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis” (1535–45/1544–54), AI 5:41 (WA 43:456): “*Tertium genus est iocosum. Quando quis cum aliquo iocatur, salva tamen gravitate, pietate et fide, qualis iste ludus est Rebeckae et Isaac, aut cum maritus ludit aut fallit uxorem aut filiolum, quae fallacia detecta movet eis risum et hilaritatem. Ibi desinit mendacium, et nihil est praeter risum aut ludum. Hoc etiam utile mendacium est, praesertim inter coniunctos familiaritate et benevolentia.*”

Playing games with God

Luther defends play among human beings, and he will even describe God as playing with human beings. Yet one basic way of describing human faithlessness for Luther is to describe human beings as trying to play their own games with God. In his sermons on John 17, for example, Luther denounces the scholastic theologians as those who “begin their teaching up in the heights of heaven and preach about God alone and apart from Christ . . . who speculated and played games with God’s works up in heaven: what He is, thinks, and does in Himself, and so on.”¹⁹ Elsewhere, Luther says that “the Sacramentarians play a game when they want to grasp the Word by their own reason.”²⁰

To “play games with God,” with God’s word or God’s works, means to subject God to the rules discernible by human reason: the hierarchy of being or the moral structure of divine goodness diffused through the world, as if God could be caught in our own “double mill” of metaphysical or ethical necessity. In this way, Zwingli argues that God’s omnipotence in fact precludes his presence in the Sacrament, because for God to be bound to the elements would be a limitation of divine power.²¹

For Luther, all this is playing games with God. For Zwingli, of course, it is the opposite. Zwingli rejects Luther’s insistence on “This is my body”—that God can command and do whatever he wills—as being (Zwingli says) “rather childish,” since “the works which God commands he commands for our benefit. God is true and is light; he does not lead into darkness. . . . God does not act thus.”²² What is this but to insist that God does not, cannot play games? Zwingli stands at Marburg, as Heiko Oberman notes, as a representative of the *via antiqua*, the realist school, drawing on Plato through Aristotle and Aquinas’ platonized Aristotle, for whom statements about what God does are necessary consequences of an understanding of what God is. God is spirit; he cannot be flesh. God is light; he cannot be obscure.²³ For Zwingli,

¹⁹ Luther, “The Seventeenth Chapter of St. John” (1528/1530), AE 69:39 (WA 28:101): “*die oben am hoehesten anfahren zu leren und predigen von Gott blos und abgesondert von Christo, wie man bisher jnn hohen schulen speculirt und gespilet hat mit seinen wercken droben jm himel, was er sey, dencke und thue bey sich selbs &c.*”

²⁰ Luther, “Lectures on Isaiah 40–66” (1527–30), AE 17:244 (WA 31/2:450): “*Ita luduntur sacramentarii, qui volunt verbum comprehendere sua racione.*”

²¹ See Heiko Oberman, *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications*, translated by Andrew Colin Gow (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 195–197.

²² Luther, “The Marburg Colloquy and the Marburg Articles” (1529), AE 38:21 (WA 30/3:118): “*Deus verus est et lumen non inducit in tenebras. . . . Ita non facit deus.*”

²³ Heiko Oberman, “Via antiqua and via moderna: Late Medieval Prolegomena to Early Reformation Thought,” in *Impact of the Reformation: Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 16–19.

the God of human games is bound by necessity even in his omnipotence. Luther's God, who plays games, is radically free.

God's Game: the Masks of God

What are the precedents for Luther's discussion of God's play? Certainly the Nominalist description of divine omnipotence undergirds Luther's idea. Yet the idea of divine play (*ludus*) does not figure prominently in the Nominalist tradition so far as can be seen. Rather, the divine freedom is structured for Nominalists by God's freely chosen covenant (*pactum*), an emphasis which passes then, through Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), into the Reformed tradition as well.²⁴ In its own way, the Nominalist idea of covenant is also in tension with the idea of play.

One exegetical source on which Luther consciously draws is the Vulgate translation of Proverbs 8:30–31, where the Latin *ludens* is used to describe Wisdom in relation to the world. "I was with Him, assembling all things, and I took delight day by day, playing before Him at all times, playing in the world, and my delight was to be with the sons of men."²⁵ Yet though Proverbs 8 is an important christological text for the church fathers, the theme of "play" seems to receive relatively little development either among the Latin fathers or the medieval theologians. Luther himself questions the translation of the Hebrew as *ludens* in his lectures on Genesis 4, though he returns to the traditional translation by the time he reaches chapter 42.

Already in Luther's first Psalms lectures, however, he applies the text about Wisdom's "play" in the world to explain the following words of Psalm 104:27:

"These all look to you, to give them their food in due season. You give it to them, they gather it up, you open your hand and they are filled with good things; when you hide your face, they are dismayed, when you take away their breath, they die and return to the ground. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth."²⁶

This, Luther says, describes Wisdom's play with the world named in Proverbs 8. God opens and closes his hand and opens it again so that the creatures are filled, or wither and die or created anew. Mystically, Luther says, this refers to the church,

²⁴ See J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1980).

²⁵ "cum eo eram cuncta componens et delectabar per singulos dies ludens coram eo omni tempore, ludens in orbe terrarum et deliciae meae esse cum filiis hominum." Robert Weber, Roger Gryson, and Bonifatius Fischer, eds., *Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, Editionem quintam emendatam retractatam (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), sub loco.

²⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016). Unless otherwise noted, Scripture citations are translated directly from Luther's German or Latin.

in which God opens his hand to fill human beings with the word of the gospel or closes it to remind them that they are children of wrath, to humble them, before God opens it again to renew them in spirit.

The aspect of "play" is identified with the alternations of divine action which are outside the control of the creatures, particularly the human creatures, who experience them. The identification of God's action with this kind of reversal—the human being lifted up and cast down and lifted up again—is a key part of Luther's inheritance from German mysticism that shapes his articulation of law that kills and the gospel which makes alive.

The idea of God's play, however, is not part of the *Theologia Deutsch*. Some traces do appear in Tauler, in connections which suggest that Luther knew them. "See how the loving Goodness of God can play with His elect!" Tauler says, speaking of the way God leads those whom He loves through "wondrous ways . . . into the deep abyss within Himself."²⁷ Luther, too, connects his idea of God's play with the idea that God "leads his saints in wondrous ways"—Luther's translation of Psalm 4:3.²⁸ Yet Luther's conception of God's play is emphatically centered on the incarnate God, not on the abyss of divine being.

Moreover, elsewhere Tauler (or a sermon transmitted in his corpus) makes clear that such "play" is a preliminary stage in spiritual development: God plays with the immature until they are ready "to leave off childish play."²⁹ For Luther, the Christian never outgrows God's play. This aspect of Luther's construction of Christian life has of course proved enormously frustrating to other Christians who, like Tauler, want to see Christians grow up and stand on their own, to move on to solid food from milk. Here Luther stands against old Pelagius, who described the mature Christian as so grown up that he no longer needs God (*emancipatus a Deo*) and with Augustine, for whom the Christian was always dependent on God's grace

²⁷ Johann Tauler, "Sermon for the Monday before Palm Sunday", in Ferdinand Vetter, ed., *Die Predigten Taulers* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1910; repr. 1968), 55–56: "hant ir út geprüfet, wie wunderliche wege er sú gefüret het und sin spil hie gewiset ist? . . . Sicher er het sú hie alzumole wole geordent und durch wunderliche wilde wege sú geführt und geleitet und übergeführt in daz tieffe abgrunde in sich selber. . . . Sehent wie die minnenliche güte Gottes mit sinen uzerwelte spilen kan."

²⁸ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–1545/1544–1554), AE 8:12–13 (WA 44:588).

²⁹ Johann Tauler, "Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent," in *Des erleuchten D.Johannis/ Tauleri/ von eym waren Euangelischen leben/ Götliche Predig* (Cologne: Quentel, 1543), fol 78v: "Unser her thut recht als eynn ersam vatter/ der seynen kynderen die weil sie in seyner kost jung seynd/ in allen dyngen vor ist/ Was jnen von not ist versorgt er/ und leest sie spielen gaen. . . . Darnach gibt erinen eyn teil von seyner gut in jr hant/ und er wil das sie selber sollen sorgen und winnen/ das spielen gaen begeben/ und also lernen reich werden," translated by Susanna Winkworth, *The History and Life of the Reverend Doctor John Tauler of Strasbourg; with Twenty-Five of his Sermons* (New York: Wiley & Halsted, 1858), 320–321. This sermon is not found in the manuscripts edited by Vetter.

like the child stilled at its mother's breast (Ps 131:2).³⁰ Luther does see God's play as shaping the Christian in what we might call "spiritual growth." But for Luther this means an ever deepening faith and reliance upon God, not independence.

At the same time, Luther's idea of God's game departs from the Nominalist or Reformed idea of covenant in that it is always agonistic, both in the presentation of conflicting claims from God but also in human struggle (faith) to lay hold of the promise. Insisting on God's promise of grace over against the condemnation of his commands is never a simple legal appeal but a struggle, wrestling with God, as Luther sees especially in the example of Jacob but also in the Canaanite woman in the Gospels.

Finally, by the time of the Genesis lectures, Luther's analysis of God's play has come to be identified with his discussion of the three estates as God's masks. In providing for creation as well as in proclaiming the gospel, God works (or rather plays) through means.

God's Game: Law and Gospel

Luther's interpretation of God's activity as "play" serves both exegetically and homiletically to frame the Christian's apparently contradictory experience of God both in Scripture and in life. This is especially pressing for Luther in interpreting the ministry of Jesus himself. In reviewing the presentation of Jesus' character in Matthew's Gospel, Luther summarizes "We see that the Lord Christ is depicted and presented to us in Holy Scripture in two ways. First, He is so completely friendly, merciful, meek, and kind that no one could imagine anyone more friendly or kindly disposed. . . . On the other hand, He is so unfriendly, strong willed, and at times almost to be regarded as tyrannical."³¹

Luther faces this contradiction by analyzing Jesus' rhetoric in Matthew's Gospel in words and action. Luther's analysis of Jesus quickly becomes at least implicitly a rejoinder to Erasmus' description of Christian rhetoric or his so-called "philosophy of Christ." "Jesus is not, for Luther, the irenic, rational teacher Erasmus imagines, but an impassioned speaker who deliberately provokes His enemies by speaking offensively [*odiose*], even using scatology, and who expresses Himself in paradoxes

³⁰ See Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 351–352.

³¹ Luther, "Sermons on Matthew 18–24" (1537–1540/1796–1847), AI: 68:100 (WA 47:400): "Und alhier sehen wir, das der Herr Christus auff zweierley weise uns in der Heiligen Schriefft abgemalet und furgehalten wirdt. Erstlich ist ehr so gahr freundlich, Barmhertzig, sanfftmuttig und guttig, das man doch nichts freundlicher noch holdtseligers erdencken kunde. . . . Widerumb so ist ehr unfreundlich, eigensinnig und also zu rechnen schier Tirannisch bissweilen,"

in order to sharpen His message and impress it on the minds of His hearers—aspects of Luther's own rhetoric which Erasmus had denounced."³²

To the disciples who believe in him, on the other hand, Christ speaks in a sweet way so as to show himself friendly and well-disposed. With his disciples, Jesus often jests and plays in his words, yet in such a way as to demonstrate his seriousness in his goodwill toward them. At the same time, for his disciples even his apparent wrath is a kind of "play" not to be taken with ultimate seriousness.

Thus, in discussing Jesus' coming to the disciples on the sea in Matthew 14, Luther says:

Christ Himself frightens His own disciples. . . . [I]t would have been frightening enough that they were beset by wind and sea, so that they much rather needed relief and help, but [Christ] Himself adds fear to fear, danger to danger, by appearing to them after a long period of struggle. . . .

But why does [Christ] do such things to His beloved friends and disciples? It is so that we might learn His goodwill toward us, because He plays with us in the sweetest way when we think that all things have become utterly desperate. The fault lies with our sin, which does not allow us to recognize that He is present, but thinks Him an apparition—or, rather, a devil—because He appears otherwise than we imagine and He remains silent. For in the midst of temptation we think that He is ashore or on the mountain where we left Him; we cannot understand that He is present.

He therefore gives us a general rule: that in the midst of all our temptations we of ourselves will imagine God to be someone other than He is. For at that moment we think that God is not God but a phantom, that is, the kind of monstrous apparition that wants to devour us in the midst of troubles. For this reason we must not believe our own thoughts about God, for it is certain that our speculations about God make an altogether hostile phantom out of the God who is altogether well-disposed toward us.

And this should most especially be heeded by those who are in a definite office and vocation—just as the disciples here were in the midst of the sea not by any temerity of their own but at the command and prompting of Christ Himself, who had made them set sail [Matt. 14:22]. For to people such as these, such things take place to test them, just as Abraham had been tempted to sacrifice his son Isaac [Gen. 22:1–2]. Or, again, Jacob wrestles with the Angel [Gen.

³² Christopher Boyd Brown, "Introduction to Volume 67," AE 67:xlili. See Erasmus, "Discussion of Free Will," in *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974–), 76:12–13, 86 (hereafter *CWE*); Erasmus, *Hyperaspistes* 1, *CWE*: 76:96–102.

32:24–28], etc. These are testings and temptations against the promises and vocations given by God Himself. Here, therefore, one must take his stand and say, “Even if God Himself should command the opposite, I shall not retreat from the place where I have been stationed, for either He is testing me by playing with me or else, if I perish, He will raise me back up.” Thus faith should stand firm in whatever the first commandment of one’s vocation is and with eyes closed declare: “Even if Christ Himself says something else, I shall not yield, for I am certain that it is either not really Christ or that He wants to play with me.” This is just how Paul puts it in Galatians 1 [8]: “Even if an angel from heaven [should preach] another [Gospel],” etc. For it is impossible that an angel would say anything else in earnest. Therefore, if He says something else, you should believe that He is acting playfully, out of love for you, just as a father does toward his son, to test him, etc.³³

Luther’s idea of God’s action as play is manifest here in several key elements (which also appear in his treatment of the narratives in Genesis to which he refers). First, it is indeed Christ himself who terrifies his disciples. The terror of God’s action is not denied. The experience of God as enemy is indeed devastating. Second, lack of faith magnifies the terror by perceiving God as a “hostile phantom” but failing for the moment to perceive God’s game. The speculations which are the basis of human games about God are utterly unable to grasp God’s own play. If God’s action is

³³ Luther, “Annotations on Matthew 1–18” (1534–45/1538), AE 67:229–231 (WA 38:579–80): “*Christus etiam ipsemet terret suos derelictos discipulos in mari, Nam satis fuisset terroris, quod vento et mari vexabantur, ut potius solatio et auxilio opus habuerint. Ipse vero addit timorem timori, periculum periculo, apparens eis post longam luctam. . . . Sed cur talia dilectis facit amicis et discipulis? Scilicet ut discamus optimam voluntatem eius erga nos, quod nobiscum ludit suavissime, cum nos putamus omnia esse perditissima. Culpa est peccati nostri, quod non sinit eum agnosci praesentem, sed putat eum esse phantasma, seu diabolium potius, Quia apparet aliter quam cogitamus, et tacet. Nos enim in tentatione putamus eum esse in littore vel in monte, ubi relinquimus, praesentem non possumus intelligere. ¶ Ergo Canonem hic dat nobis, quod in omnibus tentationibus nos ipsi alium fingimus Deum esse, quam sit. Putamus enim deum tunc non esse Deum, sed phantasma, id est horribile spectrum, quod nos velit devorare in mediis angustiis. Ideo non esse credendum nostris propriis cogitationibus de Deo, Quia certum est, quod nostrae cogitationes de Deo faciunt ex Deo fauentissimo phantasma hostilissimum. ¶ Et hoc maxime debent observare, qui sunt in vocatione et officio certo, sicut hic discipuli erant in medio mari, non sua temeritate, sed iussu et impulsu ipsius Christi, qui coegerat eos navigare. Nam talibus ista fiunt, ut probentur. Sicut Abraham fuit tentatus, ut filium Isaac offerret. Item Iacob luctatur cum Angelo, etc. Hae sunt tentationes contra promissiones et vocaciones ab ipso Deo datas. Ideo hic standum est et dicendum: Etiam si Deus ipse contrarium iubeat, non cedam loco, quo constitutus sum, Quia vel tentat me iocando mecum, vel, si periero, rursus me suscitabit. Ut stet fides firma in primo aliquo vocationis mandato, et clausis oculis dicat: Etiam si ipse Christus aliud dixerit, non cedam, Quia certus sum vel non esse Christum vere, vel ipsum velle mecum iocari. Sicut et Paul. Gal. 1:[8]: Si angelus è coelo aliud, etc. Nam non est possibile, quod angelus serio aliud dicat. Ergo si aliud dixerit, ludere eum credas prae amore erga te, sicut pater erga filium, ut tentet eum, etc.”*

perceived as a game, it is (as Luther says in the narrative of Joseph in the Genesis lectures) a cat's game which means death to the mouse.³⁴ Nevertheless, behind the appearance—the mask or spectre of wrath and terror, even the threat of death and damnation—God is playing as a loving father with his children.

Luther returns to this theme of God's play—Jesus playing with the disciples as a loving father plays with his children—over and over again in his notes on Matthew. Jesus asks the disciples questions beyond their understanding like a father playing with a child. "Christ is the sort of sweet father who jokes with his sweet children in earnest and with delight and takes in the best way whatever they say and do in a foolish or childish way."³⁵ God is a father who plays games.

God as Father at Play

In awareness of the theme of God's play, it is remarkable to note how important "play" is to Luther's description of God as father—not in trinitarian terms, but in relation to human beings. In calling God "Father," Luther is not invoking an analogy of being between human masculinity and divine activity, as Aquinas and other realist theologians do, but describing a relationship typified by play.³⁶

Already this is at the core of Luther's earliest homiletical invocations of the theme of God's play, in sermons of 1516–1517 in which he writes: "God indeed plays with us like a father with his little child."³⁷ Again: "Thus God plays with us, and we are his dear children; he dandles us and cuffs us."³⁸ That is, God plays by giving and taking away earthly goods, even life itself.

Again, what sets Luther apart is not simply the idea of God's play, but the kind of play. Steven Ozment has pointed out the contrasting ways in which Erasmus and Luther deploy the language of play in their controversy over free will. Erasmus compares God to a father who holds out an apple to a child in order to teach the child

³⁴ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–45/1544–54), AE 7:225 (WA 44:466); see also Luther, "Preface to A True Account of What Took Place at Stassfurt on Christmas Eve, 1534" (1535), AE 60:80 (WA 38:333).

³⁵ Luther, "Annotations on Matthew 1–18" (1534–45/1538), AE 67:216 (WA 38:570).

³⁶ Contrast Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 13a., Art. 6 and II Q. 26a., Art. 10, in Thomas Gilby et al., eds, 61 vols. (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1964–1981; reprint Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3:68–69 and 34:147–79; cf. James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1997), 177–179.

³⁷ Sermo in die S. Laurentii (August 10, 1516), WA 1:75: "*Verum nobiscum ludit, sicut Pater cum infantulo suo, cui aufert munusculum, ut affectum filii probet et ad sese sollicitet. Dedit enim ut fiduciam sui faceret, aufert ut probet eandem.*"

³⁸ Luther, "De Sacerdotum dignitate Sermo" (1517?), WA 4:656: "*Also spilett Gott mitt uns, und wir seint seine liben kindlen, ehr tentzelt mitt uns und steupett uns.*" For the dating see Aland, *Hilfsbuch zum Lutherstudium*, 4th edition (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 1996), 207 (Pr 43).

how to walk over and take it. The apple is a gift, but the child must learn to respond in order to get the prize. In a similar vein, Erasmus argued about the commandments. God would not command “thou shalt” to human beings who were utterly unable to comply.³⁹

Luther has a more complex image of divine fatherhood and of God’s games: “How often,” Luther writes, “do parents have a game with their children by telling them to come to them, or to do this or that, simply for the sake of showing them how unable they are, and compelling them to call for the help of the parents’ hand!”⁴⁰

Erasmus’ God plays games that are edifying and straightforward, and that cultivate independence (perhaps the sort of educational games that parents buy for their children that get played once or not at all)! Luther’s God plays games with terrifying reversals. Their point is not to teach a lesson that is to be taken to heart away from the game, but to draw the players closer together.

Luther returns to the game with the apple in the Genesis lectures on Jacob:

For God in His boundless goodness dealt very familiarly with His chosen patriarch Jacob and disciplined him as though playing with him in a kindly manner. But this playing means infinite grief and the greatest anguish of heart [to Jacob]. In reality, however, it is a game, as the outcome shows when Jacob comes to Peniel. Then it will be manifest that they were pure signs of most familiar love. So God plays with him to discipline and strengthen his faith just as a godly parent takes from his son an apple with which the boy was delighted, not that he should flee from his father or turn away from him but that he should rather be incited to embrace his father all the more and beseech him, saying: “My father, give back what you have taken away!” Then the father is delighted with this test, and the son, when he recovers the apple, loves his father more ardently on seeing that such love and child’s play gives pleasure to the father.⁴¹

³⁹ Erasmus, *Discussion of Free Will*, translated by Peter Macardle, in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 76, edited by Charles Trinkaus (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 81. Series cited hereafter as CWE. See Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: 1250–1550* (New Haven: Yale, 1980), 297.

⁴⁰ Luther, “On the Bondage of the Will” (1525), AE 33:120 (WA 18:673): “*Quoties parentes cum filiis suis ludunt, dum eos iubent aut ad se venire, hoc aut illud facere, ea tantum gratia, ut appareat, quam non possint, coganturque manum parentis invocare?*”

⁴¹ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis” (1535–45/1544–54), AE 6:130 (WA44:97): “*Deus enim immensa bonitate familiarissime agit cum electo suo Patriarcha Iacob, cumque exercet, quasi colludens suavissime. Sed ludus hic immensus et summa angustia animi est. Ii revera tamen est ludus: sicut exitus ostendit, quando veniet ad Phanuel. Tunc enim erit manifestum fuisse mera signa familiarissimi amoris. Ac propterea ludit cum eo, ut exerceat et corroboret fidem eius. Perinde ut pius aliquis parens rapit filio pomum, quo delectabatur puer, non ut aufugiat et aversetur patrem, sed ut magis incitetur ad patrem amplectendum, obsecrandum: mi pater, redde, quod abstulisti. Ibi*

God's Game and Faith

In turn, the disciples themselves, recognizing that God is playing with them, are able, in faith, to join in God's game. Luther's great examples here (and likely another of the sources of the language of play) are the narratives of the martyrs of the early church, to whom he returns again and again, and encourages his students to do likewise:

Here you should introduce the examples and sayings of the saints who scorned death, such as Vincent, St. Agatha, Anastasia, [and] Lucy. For St. Vincent, laughing at those who put him to death, said, "Death and crosses are a kind of joke and game to Christians," and, treading upon glowing coals, he boasted that he was walking upon roses. St. Agatha said she was going to a banquet and a wedding feast when she was going off to prison and torture. Many others did likewise.⁴²

Nevertheless, as Luther describes it, these are heroic examples of faith, which are able to treat death as a game. For ordinary Christians in dire circumstances, this is not expected. But God's game should be discerned. As Luther says in the Genesis lectures:

But how many understand or believe this? If we could persuade ourselves of this, we would be truly happy and completely prepared to endure any evils whatever in a happy frame of mind. But when I reflect that I am a sinner and that I am being punished on account of my faults, I judge far differently. For I do not feel that God is my Father, that He is good and merciful, but that He is the devil himself. Therefore you should know that God is almighty and that for this reason a serious game becomes Him and is worthy of such great majesty. And one must learn, and accustom oneself to, the things in which He delights and His games, as Ps. 4:3 states. . . . Consider that God is playing with you, and that this game is wonderful for you and gives pleasure to God. For if He did not embrace you with His fatherly heart, He would not play with you this way. Therefore this is proof of His ineffable mercy toward you, that you are numbered among those with whom God is pleased, and that He takes delight in you. Accordingly He gives you His promise, Word, and Sacrament as most

delectatur pater tentatione illa, et filius, quando recipit pomum, ardentius amat, cum videt patri voluptati esse amorem et lusum puerilem."

⁴² Luther, "Annotations on Matthew 1-18" (1534-1535/1538), AE 67:106-107 (WA 38:506): "Ilic inserenda sunt exempla et dicta Sanctorum, qui mortem riserunt. Ut Vincentius. S. Agatha. Athanasia. Lucia. S. Vincentius enim ridens occisores suos, dixit, Mortem et cruces Christianis esse quaedam iocularia et ludicra. Et super prunas incedens gloriabatur se super rosas ire. S. Agatha ad epulas et nuptias ire se dixit, cum ad carceres et tormenta iret. Sic multi alii." Cf. Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535-45/1544-54), AI: 8:255 (WA 44:766).

certain symbols and testimonies of grace, that He has adopted you as His son, and that He requires nothing else than that you bear His games, which are pleasing to Him and salutary to you.⁴³

The God who does not play games does not need faith. If God is caught in human metaphysical or ethical schemes, then I can know what God must necessarily do toward me by analyzing my own status: if I am good, then God who is good must be good toward me. If I am like God in my inner being then I am part of God. But with the God who plays games, there can be only faith, trust like that of a child who is tossed in the air and can only trust that he will be caught in his father's arms. The point of the game is not victory for one side or the other through the application of rules, but the relationship of trust (*fiducia*) and love that is deepened between the players.

God's Play in the Incarnation

When God plays his game with his saints, he does not simply set up a game for them to play (and lose) against terrible opponents—sin, death, and hell. Rather, God himself is in the game, in the incarnation. To play God's game is to play with God, the incarnate God. It is not simply a game over which God presides in omnipotent transcendence.

For Luther, the incarnation of the Son as a child embodies the eternal divine game: "But we have an infant, this Child [Isa. 9:6]: the mother bears Him for us, nurses Him for us; He remains a Child for us for ever. He does not display Himself to us in somber seriousness, not in some terrible majesty at which we would have to tremble, but he shows Himself to us as a little Child, and in his childhood he plays with us to all eternity."⁴⁴ God's play with His beloved people is perpetual and eternal.

⁴³ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–45/1544–54), AE 7:226 (WA 44:467): "*Sed quotusquisque hoc intelligit aut credit? Si illud in animum nostrum inducere possemus, vere beati essemus ac paratissimi ad quaevis mala hilari animo perferenda. Cum autem cogito me esse peccatorem, ac plecti propter delicta, longe aliter iudico, non enim sentio Deum esse patrem, esse bonum et misericordem, sed Diabolum ipsum. Scias ergo Deum esse omnipotentem, ac propterea ludum ei gravem ac tanta maiestate dignum esse convenire. Ac descendum sane et assuescendum est ad delicias et ludos eius, sicut dicit Psalmus 4. . . . [C]ogitate Deum vobiscum ludere, qui ludus vobis mirabilis et Deo est delectabilis. Nisi enim paterno animo vos complecteretur, non ita vobiscum luderet. Argumentum igitur est ineffabilis misericordiae erga te, quod tu in illorum numero sis, quibus delectatur Deus, apud quem deliciae ipsius sunt. Ideo dat tibi promissionem suam, verbum, sacramentum, tanquam symbola et testimonia gratiae certissima, quod te sibi filium adoptaverit, et nihil aliud requirit, quam ut lusus eius sustineas, qui ipsi iucundi sunt et tibi salutare.*"

⁴⁴ Luther, "Enarratio capituli noni Esaiiae" (1543–44/1546), WA 40/3:641: "*Habemus autem Infantem et hunc Filium, mater parit eum nobis, lactat eum nobis, manet Puer nobis in aeternum. Exhibet se nobis non tetra gravitate, non terribili aliqua maiestate tremendum, sed exhibet se nobis parvulis Parvulum ac ludii nobiscum in aeternum in pueritia sua.*"

In Luther's reading of Matthew's Gospel, that is manifest by Jesus' continued presence with his foolish disciples, even as he plays with them in chiding their little faith. Luther says:

From these words one may understand how sweet was Christ's conversation with His disciples. For here, as if at play, He is joking pleasantly with Peter, as if with a baby that in its simplicity lacks all artifice, and Christ is delighting in his childish simplicity. And yet you see no frivolity here, but only earnestness and majesty in Christ rejoicing in Peter's simplicity. There must have been a fine, friendly, dear camaraderie indeed between Christ and His disciples, as this passage makes clear. It is as if someone were to jest with his infant son or with the sweetest friend, except that Christ's jesting here is serious in such a way that it is at the same time supremely sweet. And if you pay attention to how great a person it is who is jesting with Peter like this, you could not help but be stirred with the highest love toward God, who condescends to set aside His majesty and to joke and to play with these uneducated men like this, and to jest, as it were, to the point of raising the suspicion of frivolity. Caiaphas would not have acted this way, nor the Pharisees nor the other hypocrites, but if they had heard or seen such things, they would soon have said with furrowed brow: "Look! What a great, fine show-off He is, playing like this with these peasants!" etc. But for us, these things are comforts and spurs to faith, to love the Christ who is so intimate and so sweet, who does not despise fools or the simple.⁴⁵

In the Genesis lectures, the ultimate and climactic game with God is Jacob's wrestling with the angel of the Lord. As Luther insists, "[this] wrestler is the Lord of glory, God Himself, or God's Son, who was to become incarnate and who appeared and spoke to the fathers." It is in playing God's game, in wrestling with God, that Jacob comes to know God himself. "For Jacob has no idea who it is who is wrestling with him; he does not know that it is God, because he later asks what His name is.

⁴⁵ Luther, "Annotations on Matthew 1-18" (1534-35/1538), AE 67:319-320 (WA 38:666): "*Ex quibus intelligere est, quam suavis fuerit conversatio Christi cum discipulis. Quia hic velut ludens iucunde iocatur cum Petro, velut cum infante, qui sine dolo simplex est, et delectatur Christus illius simplicitate infantili. Et tamen nihil levitatis hic vides, sed meram gravitatem et maiestatem in Christo, laetantem de simplicitate Petri. Lis mus ia ein fein, freundlich, lieblich gesellschaftli sein gewest inter Christum et discipulos suos, ut hic locus arguit, Tanquam si quis cum filio infante, vel cum suavissimo sodale nugetur. Nisi quod istae nugae Christi sic sunt seriae, ut simul sint suavissime. Ac si spectes, quanta sit persona, quae sic nugatur cum Petro, non possis non summo amore erga Deum affici, Qui dignetur (omissa maiestate) cum istis idiotis sic iocari, ludere et veluti nugari usque ad suspicionem levitatis. Non sic fecisset Caiphas, non Pharisei, non caeteri hypocritae. Sed si audissent vel vidissent talia, mox rugata fronte dixissent: Ecce quam est ille bonus et magnus phantasta, qui cum istis rusticis sic ludit, etc. Sed nobis sunt ista solatia et irritamenta fidei, ad amandum illum familiarissimum et suavissimum Christum, qui non aspernatur stultos seu simplices.*"

But after he receives the blessing, he says: 'I have seen the Lord face to face.' Then new joy and life arises from the sad temptation and death itself."⁴⁶ It is the God who plays games who is able to become flesh and who then is able to give the presence of his body and blood as pledge. As we might say, quite literally, God has skin in the game. So it is the incarnation which, alongside the Nominalist idea of God's freedom, is fundamental to Luther's idea of God's play.

God's Game in Preaching

God's game continues through the preaching of the law and the gospel, though the world refuses to play along. The Holy Scriptures themselves, for Luther, are examples (as well as witnesses) of God's play. Why, Luther imagines his opponents asking, do the Scriptures (interpreted literally) deal so much with inconsequential, practical matters like the marriages, households, and flocks of the patriarchs rather than high, spiritual mysteries? It is because "the Holy Spirit, God the Creator, deigns to play, to jest, and to trifle with His saints in unimportant and inconsequential matters."⁴⁷ Things which seem unimportant measured in themselves are nonetheless important within God's game. To reject them, to reject God's game, is to reject God. In Matthew 11:16, Jesus says "To what shall I compare this generation?" Luther expounds:

It is as if He were saying, "The evil and crookedness of this perverse and adulterous generation is so great that it cannot be expressed in any straightforward speech or portrayed with any comparison." Finally, He takes up a children's game in which children say to others of the same age:

[Matt. 11:]17. "We sang for you, and you did not dance; [we wailed, and you did not mourn]."

⁴⁶ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–45/1544–54), AE 6:130 (WA 44:96–97): "Nostra vero sententia haec est, quod luctator sit Dominus gloriae, Deus ipse, sive filius Dei incarnandus, qui apparuit et locutus est patribus. Deus enim immensa bonitate familiarissime agit cum electo suo Patriarcha Iacob, eumque exercet, quasi colludens suavissime. Sed ludus hic immensus dolor et summa angustia animi est. Et revera tamen est ludus: sicut exitus ostendit, quando veniet ad Phanuel. Tunc enim erit manifestum fuisse mera signa familiarissimi amoris. Ac propterea ludit cum eo, ut exerceat et corroboret fidem eius. . . . Iacob enim ignorat, quis sit iste, qui cum eo luctatur, nescit esse Deum: quia postea interrogat, quod sit ipsi nomen. Postquam vero accipit benedictionem, inquit: 'Vide Dominum facie ad faciem'. Ibi nova laetitia et vita ex tristissima tentatione et ipsa morte existit."

⁴⁷ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–45/1544–54), AE 5:353, translation altered (WA 43:672): "Spiritus sanctus autem, et Deus creator dignatur ludere, nugari et ineptire cum suis sanctis in rebus leviculis et exilibus."

It is not known what that game was. It is rather similar to the way in which among us [children] jeer at others and say toward peevish fellow players: "Spoilsport! Sow-sticker! He buys a spur with an egg and rides it to pieces on that pig." What is meant by this is that the other party by his peevishness is ruining a game the others would like to play. In this way perhaps these [children], too, ridiculed their playmates who were ruining the game by their peevishness, saying, "We sang for you." It is as if they were saying, "It does no good if we ask, and you do not care if we get angry. Oh, you are unfriendly spoilsports! You are good for nothing!"

Thus these godless ones are not ready for God's game—that is, for dealing with the Gospel—and they spoil it as much as they are able. And so they are moved neither by this nor by that. No matter how you do it, it is wrong.⁴⁸

To understand God's game is therefore necessary not only for all Christians undergoing suffering and trials, but especially for those who preach the word. According to Luther's reading, the disciples in the boat where Jesus had sent them were placed in an office, as preachers have been divinely placed in the public office of preaching. The preacher is both the object of God's game and also the agent through whom the game is played.

Conclusion

What difference does it make to describe Luther's theology or to preach and apply Lutheran theology in terms of God's play? I have shown that the theme appears in Luther outside of the Genesis lectures, beginning quite early in his lecturing and preaching. To be sure, it is not as prominent as other structures or ways of speaking in Luther's theology—law and gospel, the three estates, or *Anfechtungen*. It does, however, help to frame these categories in a way that is native to Luther's own thinking about them. If nothing else, it provides a different and striking rhetorical strategy for talking about these basic elements.

⁴⁸ Luther, "Annotations on Matthew 1–18" (1534–35/1538), AF 67:132–133 (WA 38:521): "Q. d. Tanta est malicia et perversitas huius pravae et adulterae generationis, quod nulla simpliciter oratione exprimi, aut ulla similitudine pingi possit. Apprehendit tandem istum ludum puerilem, in quo coaequales dicunt aliis: Cecinimus vobis, et non saltastis. Quis fuerit iste ludus, nescitur. Apud nos similis est fere, qua insultant aliis, et dicunt contra morosos collusores: O spiel zu brecher, Sew zu stecher. Er kaufft ein sporlin umb ein ey, und reit es auff einer saw entzwey. Quo significatur alteram partem morositate sua ludum solvere, quem alii libenter haberent. Sic illi forte etiam suos collusores, ludum morositate sua dissolventes, irriserunt, dicendo: Cecinimus vobis. Q. d. Bitten wir, so hilffs nicht, Zurnen wir, so fragt ir doch nichts darnach, Ach, ir seid feindselige spiel zu brecher, Ir tueget nirgent zu. Sic ludo isti divino, id est, Euangelico negocio, impii isti non sunt apti, et solvunt, quantum in eis est, Ita ut nec sic nec sic moveantur, wie mans macht, so ists unrecht."

In pastoral care and consolation, the language of God's play is both a powerful and a problematic mode of speaking. Can a pastor dare to comfort a child diagnosed with incurable cancer that she is playing with God, that her illness is part of God's game? As Robert Kolb has observed, Luther's discussion of God's play is most prominent in the lecture hall.⁴⁹ Yet as I have shown here, he employs this language in homiletical materials as well. In pastoral care and consolation, the language of God's play provides a way of interpreting a Christian's suffering in relation to God's care in a way that does not center exclusively on suffering as punishment for sin.

Finally, Luther's insistence that God is fundamentally one who plays games is an important touchstone for evaluating interpretations of his theology or its relationship to historical and contemporary alternatives. Is the God proposed by those who would assimilate Luther to Aquinas—or even Plato—one who plays games? A God who does not—or cannot—play games is not Luther's God, nor is he the God of the Scriptures as Luther understands them. The theme of God's play in Luther's theology embraces at the same time God's radical freedom—the divine omnipotence of the Nominalist *Via moderna*—the personal but not ontological relationship of the mystical tradition, and also a radical christological realism. It is a theological stance that sets Luther apart from his medieval predecessors, his Reformed contemporaries, and post-Enlightenment moderns alike. Luther's God plays games. Will we play along?

⁴⁹ Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 120.