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Mediating Change: Pamphilus Gengenbach, Print Culture, and the Vernacular in Early Reformation Basel

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Abstract: The relationship between the Reformation movement and print media has long fascinated scholars, yet much of the focus has centered on renowned figures, often overlooking local lay protagonists. This article shifts the spotlight onto one such unsung figure: Pamphilus Gengenbach, a Basel writer, printer, and publisher. Gengenbach, a fervent supporter of political and religious reform, emerged as a leading advocate of Protestant thought in Basel. His aggressive promotion of the vernacular and his adept use of intertextual references to contemporary debates and events reveal a sophisticated grasp of print media's potential beyond mere dissemination. Leveraging his experience as an author, printer, and publisher, Gengenbach engaged his audience effectively, translating and transmitting Protestant teachings with remarkable impact. This article asserts that Gengenbach's strategic communication and local influence were instrumental in paving the way for the Basel Reformation, underscoring the vital role of grassroots actors in the Reformation's success.

Keywords: Pamphilus Gengenbach; Reformation; Basel; Protestant movement; book printing; Wolfaria



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1. Introduction

The symbiotic relationship between the Reformation movement and print media has captivated scholars for decades.¹ Much of the deserved attention has been bestowed upon luminaries like Erasmus, Martin Luther, and Huldrych Zwingli, often leaving lay protagonists involved at local levels in the shadows. This article seeks to redirect a spotlight on one such unsung lay protagonist, namely the Basel writer, printer, and publisher Pamphilus Gengenbach.

Gengenbach was part of a relatively small group of lay writers who actively engaged in theological debates during the early Reformation. A firm advocate of political reform from the onset, he embraced the Reformation movement quite early, establishing himself as one of the foremost advocates of Protestant thought in Basel. Two of the most distinct features of his promotion of the Protestant cause were his aggressive campaign for the vernacular and his unique intertextual referencing of current debates and political events. As this article argues, these features reveal a sophisticated understanding of how print could transcend mere textual transmission: drawing from his rich experience as a popular author, printer, and publisher, Gengenbach showcased a unique understanding of how to captivate and engage his audience as well as to translate and transmit Protestant teachings. In this very role—as a prominent translator and transmitter—Gengenbach helped pave the way to the Basel Reformation for reformers to come.

Accordingly, by directing our attention to Pamphilus Gengenbach and examining his strategic use of vernacular language as well as political and intertextual referencing, this article highlights the multifaceted nature of early Reformation communication strategies and the enduring relevance of local actors. Gengenbach's persona and works are not merely a historical footnote but a vital component of the Reformation's complex tapestry, deserving of renewed scholarly attention.

2. Pamphilus Gengenbach

Who was Pamphilus Gengenbach? According to Stephen Ozment, Gengenbach stands as one of the most accomplished writers of the Protestant Reformation, renowned for crafting some of the era's most humorous Reformation satires (Ozment 1975, p. 90f). Despite his significant contributions, much of his early life remains obscure.² Born around 1480, probably in Basel, he belonged to the same generation as many notable reformers. However, unlike his illustrious contemporaries, Gengenbach never pursued higher education. Instead, he probably apprenticed at Anton Koberger's printing shop in the city of Nuremberg during the 1490s, where he honed his craft. Upon the completion of his apprenticeship, the young Gengenbach returned to Basel (Hartmann 1942, p. 101), where he briefly managed an inn. Around 1510, he reentered the world of printing and letters with a flourish, establishing his own printing shop in the heart of Basel. His following career as a writer and printer can be divided into three stages: the early, formative years; a period of expansion and intellectual exploration; and the final years, marked by Gengenbach's exclusive focus on religious topics.

In the formative years of his career, Gengenbach predominantly published political poems and songs, most of them resonating with historical depth and significance. His literary oeuvre mostly included moral and satirical plays and songs, addressing the pressing political issues of his days and the moral degradation he perceived: ongoing wars, political betrayal, religious division, Swiss mercenaries, and—quite prominently—his hatred for France. His hopes for social change and betterment rested on Maximilian I, whom Gengenbach saw as a savior and reformer of Europe's society and Christianity. In his eyes, the emperor was a just ruler endowed with the Christian wisdom and charisma necessary to be a perfect leader, qualities essential for achieving unity and harmony (Berger 2023, p. 67; 2024, p. 71).

Between 1516 and 1522, the second stage of his career, Gengenbach expanded his printing ambitions, setting his sights on a scholarly audience. So far, he had published in the vernacular only, focusing on an audience familiar with spoken language and with little or no formal education. During the second stage, however, he published twenty-five Latin works, including nine schoolbooks and Erasmus' pathbreaking *Novum Instrumentum Omne* (Erasmus 1522), though notably without the Greek part. Gengenbach's expanded catalog also featured collaborations with and contributions from prominent figures such as Wolfgang Capito (1478–1541) and Ulrich von Hutten (1488–1523). Embracing local printing traditions, Gengenbach more frequently partnered with renowned artists like Urs Graf (c. 1485–1528), Daniel Schwegler (known as Meister DS, c. 1480–c. 1546), and Ambrosius Holbein (c. 1494–c. 1519), each highly esteemed by the local humanist printers.

Gengenbach's ambitious expansion of his printing catalog reflects a remarkable familiarity and engagement with humanist scholarship. He still authored and published political and satirical writings, including some of his most successful and popular carnival plays.³ But his determined effort to also embed himself within the local humanist printing tradition is evident. His effort coincided with the intellectual currents of the period, marked by Erasmus' arrival in Basel in 1514 and the local rise of prominent humanists (Wackernagel 1924; Von Greyerz 2011, 2017). The 1510s witnessed Basel's emergence as a distinguished center of humanist activity and scholarship, and Gengenbach wanted to be part of it. Accordingly, Gengenbach's expansion of his printing catalog beyond political, satirical, and moralistic works was an attempt to align himself with a scholarly community and engage a learned audience.

Indeed, his efforts bore fruit: individual notes, annotations, and marginalia in Latin found in Gengenbach's books attest to the active scholarly engagement they elicited (Prietzl 1999, pp. 309–11). Beatus Rhenanus, for instance, owned three of Gengenbach's prints in his library (ibid., p. 330). Clearly, Gengenbach did succeed in reaching a learned audience, though the full extent of his ties to humanist scholarship and his standing within the (local) humanist community remains elusive.

Gengenbach's venture into Latin and humanist works came to an abrupt halt in 1522, marking the beginning of the final stage of his career and a significant shift in both his personal and professional trajectory. His initial ambitions for social and religious change rested on political reform, with particularly high expectations vested in Maximilian I. Following the emperor's death in 1519, Gengenbach increasingly redirected his aspirations for reform toward the emerging Reformation movement, though with some hesitance at the beginning. Before 1522, his religious convictions oscillated between reformed and traditional ideas, yet always yearning for a unified Church free of division. By the beginning of 1522, however, Gengenbach was ready to not only fully embrace the Reformation but also to dedicate his careers as a writer and printer to the Protestant cause. Drawing upon his status of a popular author, he positioned himself as a vital bridge between Protestant scholars and the laity, crafting his works in the vernacular to make both said scholars and his works accessible and engaging to a wider audience. Through sermons, dialogues, songs, and plays, Gengenbach captivated his audience with playful yet pointed explorations of religious topics. His tone grew even more moralistic, as he wielded harsh polemics against the Catholic Church and religious transgressions like idolatry.⁴ By the time of his death in 1525, Gengenbach was a prominent and powerful voice for the Reformation in Basel and beyond.

3. Gengenbach and the Vernacular

The Basel Reformation was not merely a bottom-up movement, although its initial support did come from the general public rather than the elite.⁵ Many at the University of Basel and on the city council were skeptical about Church reform. When priests like Wilhelm Reublin (c. 1484–c. 1599) first introduced Protestant practices in the early 1520s, they drew enormous crowds but also faced immediate penalties and expulsion from the city. It was the local craft guilds, their members, and ordinary churchgoers that were drawn to the new teachings. However, to reach these groups, the vernacular proved to be a crucial tool (see i.e., [Scribner 1981, 1987](#)). It was the perfect tool to introduce the crowds to key elements of Protestant thought and also to engage them with the cause and their faith. To wield the vernacular language effectively, however, priests and reformers relied on local pioneers like Pamphilus Gengenbach to pave the road for them by expertly translating Protestant ideas for a broad yet eager audience. As this article argues, in the last years of his career and life, Gengenbach emerged as a leading advocate of the vernacular, laying the foundation upon which the Basel Reformation was constructed.

From the very outset, Gengenbach championed the vernacular. When he launched his printing business, Latin dominated the printed word. Less than twenty percent of the prints listed on VD16 (the most comprehensive register of printed works of the sixteenth century) published in the first half of the 1510s were in German, highlighting a preference for Latin among printers, publishers, and readers alike. While Gengenbach was undoubtedly knowledgeable in Latin and capable of catering to the scholarly market, he chose to engage politically and morally with a predominantly unlearned audience more familiar with oral and visual traditions instead. This led him to prioritize the vernacular—in fact, he was likely the earliest dramatic poet in the German language ([Ozment 1975](#), p. 90). His texts were typically designed to be recited, sung, or performed, ensuring their accessibility to a wide audience through auditory, visual, and performative means.⁶ This is, where Gengenbach's strengths truly shone. One of his notable skills was his literary prowess, characterized by sharp wit and accessible, incisive humor. He had a knack for distilling complex political and religious topics to their essence and addressing pressing issues with polemical yet precise language. While his songs and plays carried heavy moralistic and instructive undertones, often on the verge of scolding the audience, they also offered solace, reconciliation, and a sense of fraternity.

As a wit and beloved author in the vernacular, Gengenbach was uniquely positioned to catalyze the impact of the Protestant movement in Basel. When Luther announced his 95 theses in Wittenberg in the fall of 1517, Basel printers were quick to respond. Adam

Petri had a Latin copy of the theses ready for printing and publishing almost immediately. Johann Froben quickly followed with another Latin print. However, it was Gengenbach who introduced the Wittenberg reformer to the broader Basel public by publishing Luther's *Sermon vom Ablass und Gnade* (Luther 1518a). The pamphlet was the first vernacular statement of Luther, summarizing his 95 theses and highlighting his rejection of indulgences as well as his advocacy for a theology of grace. It was also the first of Luther's printed works to reach a mass audience. Like everywhere else, demand in Basel was extraordinary and Gengenbach immediately had to print a second edition. However, it would take another year before Adam Petri and other Basel printers would follow Gengenbach's lead and begin publishing Luther's vernacular writings.

Remarkably, apart from Luther's pamphlet *Sermo de Penitentia* (Luther 1518b), Gengenbach never published any other work by Luther. His swift, yet brief, involvement with Luther has puzzled scholars for decades. Some see Gengenbach's immediate publishing of Luther as proof that he embraced the Protestant movement from its inception (Prietzl 1999). Others argue that the brevity of his engagement indicates that Gengenbach never fully embraced Protestantism and remained loyal to the Catholic Church instead (i.e., König 1911, p. 464; Singer 1901, p. 177).

Both positions seem to ignore that in 1518 there was no Protestant movement yet. Luther had just begun to make waves, and it would be a few more years before reform-driven priests like Reublin, Wolfgang Wissenburg (1496–1575), and later Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531) introduced Protestant ideas and practices in Basel on a large scale.⁷ It seems likely that initially, Gengenbach shared the same reserved enthusiasm toward Luther that was so prevalent in Basel in the late 1510s and early 1520s, heavily influenced by Erasmus. In addition, by the time the economic potential of Luther's vernacular texts had become fully evident, Adam Petri—following Gengenbach's lead—had already taken over the Basel market, substantially outpacing smaller printing presses such as Gengenbach's. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to assume that Gengenbach's brief foray into publishing Luther reflects the cautious curiosity of his time and hometown, along with economic motivations and means, rather than indicating any religious or pious preferences.

Instead, Gengenbach's decision to publish Luther in German underscores Gengenbach's view on the role of the vernacular in religious discourse and practice. His decision coincided with his expanding engagement in humanist scholarship. It was a period during which he demonstrated remarkable familiarity with the classics, the writings of the Church fathers, and other seminal theological works. While evidently Gengenbach acknowledged Latin as the traditional language of humanist and theological scholarship, his decision to print Luther's German pamphlet highlights his recognition of the vernacular's unique and potent role. By making Luther's vernacular teachings accessible, Gengenbach demonstrated that he understood German as the language through which the majority of people experienced and practiced their faith. It was a strategic and ideological move, suggesting that he saw the vernacular as a means for reaching a broad audience and fostering vivid and personal religiosity, directly tied to the faith and practices of the ordinary, typically illiterate people (on early modern literacy, see Houston 1988).

Four years later, Gengenbach doubled down and aggressively emphasized his conviction about the significance of the vernacular in religious contexts in two pamphlets: *Der gestryfft Schwitzer Baur* (1522a) and *Der Laienspiegel* (1522b). *Der gestryfft Schwitzer Baur* is constructed as a dialogue between a farmer and a preacher monk. The two engage in a debate about whether laymen should be allowed to read German books and make independent judgements on spiritual matters. Speaking through the farmer, Gengenbach repeatedly advocates for the vernacular even to the point of justifying violence. The farmer's recurring key witness is Paul, who taught Christians to connect with God through scripture: "Therefore, we should read the scripture every day in the German language" (Gengenbach 1522a, fol. B4v). The farmer insists that God's message transcends language barriers, arguing that those who lack love will diminish the Holy Scripture, whether it is in Latin or German (ibid.). Through the farmer, Gengenbach basically preempted Luther's

later call for everyone to study the Bible, urging those who could read to “take a psalm in the morning, or some other chapter of the Scripture, and study it for a while. This is what I do” (WA 32, p. 65).

Gengenbach’s second pamphlet, *Der Laienspiegel*, serves as a guide to faith for the unlearned, offering Gengenbach’s thorough examination of Luther’s teachings and once again strongly advocating for the vernacular. The pamphlet was a response to ongoing Catholic objection that the vernacular was inadequate for accurately comprehending and translating Scripture. Quoting Paul, Jerome, and other theological heavyweights, Gengenbach turned the Church’s objection on its head. He claimed that it was the Church and the clerics who spoke in incomprehensible language, thereby misleading believers in their faith to the point of preying upon them like wolves. He urged his readers “to diligently read or listen to, preach, and study the teachings of Christ and the Apostles. . . And do not heed the wolves (who seek not your soul, but the wool) when they say it is not fitting for you, because you do not understand it” (Gengenbach 1522b, fol. C4r.).

Gengenbach’s biography and publishing career demonstrate a significant transformation from a solid author in the vernacular to a bold leader of the vernacular and Protestant cause. The two pamphlets *Der gestryfft Schwitzer Baur* and *Der Laienspiegel* marked pivotal points in this evolution. They signaled a departure from his political and humanist pursuits and an end to his theological publications in Latin. In fact, he would never print in Latin again. Instead, drawing on his background as an author of entertaining political carnival plays, songs, and satires, Gengenbach emerged as one of Basel’s foremost advocates for the vernacular and the Protestant cause. His critique of clerical obfuscation and his call for direct lay engagement with Scripture resonated with both his audience and reformist ideas, promoting individual empowerment and spiritual autonomy.

This very promotion of the vernacular was a crucial step in paving the way for the Reformation in Basel. By advocating for the use of the vernacular in religious texts, Gengenbach made theological debates accessible to those previously excluded from such debates. Initially subtle, but increasingly bold, Gengenbach encouraged laypeople to engage with their faith directly, bypassing the traditional gatekeepers of religious knowledge, faith, and practice. This empowerment was not just spiritual but also political and social, as it challenged firmly established hierarchies. Ultimately, Gengenbach’s contributions towards the promotion of the vernacular helped lay the very foundations upon which local reformers could further advance Protestant ideas.

4. Gengenbach’s Wolfaria

Another critical feature that distinguished Gengenbach as a leading voice of the early period of the Basel Reformation was his exceptional use of intertextual and political references. As Seraina Plotke has previously observed, the majority of Gengenbach’s pamphlets were highly innovative “text-image-conglomerates” that capitalized upon the technical capabilities of book printing to disseminate theological and political messages through various channels of reception (Plotke 2018, p. 68f). Gengenbach adeptly engaged with diverse textual models, blending traditional genres with innovative patterns to create new forms of expression through intertextual play. His texts frequently alluded to contemporary works and current political events, which Gengenbach skillfully adapted and expanded upon to enhance his narratives and cause. This technique showcased Gengenbach’s ability to harness print media as a dynamic tool for communicating complex theological ideas to a broad and unlearned audience.

A striking example of Gengenbach’s use of intertextual and contemporary event referencing is his reception of Johann Eberlin von Günzburg’s Protestant utopian state Wolfaria as introduced in Eberlin’s *Fünfzehn Bundesgenossen* (*Fifteen Confederates*). The *Fünfzehn Bundesgenossen* is a collection of fifteen pamphlets advocating various aspects of early Protestant thought and reform. It was authored by Eberlin over the course of several years and subsequently published individually by Gengenbach.⁸ Eberlin (c. 1470–1533), a former Franciscan, left the order in 1521 to join the Protestant movement and turn his

pen against the Church. Although he was well-acquainted with Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560), scholars suggest that he never fully embraced the exclusively theological approach of the Wittenberg reformers, favoring social and ethical reform instead (see [Dipple 1996](#), p. 88). Just like Gengenbach, Eberlin published exclusively in the vernacular.

Today, Eberlin is probably best known for his invention of the first Protestant utopian state called Wolfaria, which was introduced in the tenth and eleventh parts of his *Fünftehn Bundesgenossen* ([Eberlin von Günzburg 1521a, 1521b](#)). Wolfaria stands as a utopian welfare state where society thrives under the governance of elected public officials dedicated to ensuring the well-being of all its citizens. In this ideal state, health and spiritual care is freely provided to those in need, and essentials, such as bread and wine, are always available, ensuring that no one goes hungry or thirsty. Natural resources, including game, fish, and timber, are public property, freely accessible to all.

Additionally, in Wolfaria trades are meticulously regulated to prevent corruption and consumerism, promoting honorable trades such as agriculture and smithery. Salaries and working conditions are controlled by law, and private enterprises face strict regulations: usury is abolished, and prices are managed. As a result, idleness is prohibited, work is mandatory, and begging punishable, fostering a society where productivity and fairness prevail. Similarly, cultural life in Wolfaria flourishes with state-provided entertainment and activities, while education is a public concern. Children of both sexes receive instruction in essential subjects, including German, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. War is strictly forbidden, but if defensive measures become unavoidable, elected officials are expected to lead the troops into battle.

Perhaps most remarkably, Eberlin's Wolfaria also introduces a national Church that is subject to careful regulation. It is based on autonomous parishes governed by a synod of equal bishops. The parishes freely and democratically elect their officials, including priests and bishops. Elected officials are prohibited from holding secular offices, though they may resign at any time and return to their previous professions. To avoid the development of primacy, the synodal meetings rotate regularly, ensuring no bishop gains preeminence. In Wolfaria, clerical celibacy is abolished, monasteries have been dissolved, and the clergy are subject to secular law and authority, just like all other citizens.

As Susan Groag Bell noted more than fifty years ago, Eberlin's Wolfaria invites comparison with Thomas More's *Utopia* ([Groag Bell 1967](#)). The latter had been published in Basel by Johann Froben in 1518, just a few years prior to Eberlin's introduction of Wolfaria. While there is no evidence that Eberlin had read *Utopia*, the parallels between More and Eberlin are evident. There are, however, some significant differences between More and Eberlin as well. As Bell and others have pointed out, "Eberlin drew many of his essentials for his reform programme from Luther" and as from Swabian and South German apocalyptic traditions ([Dipple 1996](#), p. 86). In addition, Eberlin adopted a pragmatic and practical approach, focusing on the concerns of the peasantry, thereby providing "a direct link between Luther and the German people" (*ibid.*).

One of the most significant differences, however, lies in the treatment of priests. Eberlin's vision for the Church was distinct from that of More, as Eberlin followed an approach heavily inspired by early Protestant ideas: "For More, the priest was a superior being, a mediator between God and man, whereas for Eberlin, the priest was simply a disseminator for the gospel—no more" ([Groag Bell 1967](#), p. 129). This particular understanding of the role of a priest led some scholars to identify Wolfaria as a Lutheran state (i.e., [Cole 1971](#)) directly inspired by Luther's *Address to the Christian Nobility* ([Hsia 1993](#), p. 495). While the extent of Eberlin's attachment to Luther remains debatable, it is undeniable that—unlike More's *Utopia*—Eberlin's Wolfaria was a product of early Protestant thought and propaganda.

Two years after publishing Eberlin's pamphlets on Wolfaria, Gengenbach presented his very own vision of a utopian state. Both works have largely gone unnoticed in scholarship so far. Expanding upon and evidently referencing Eberlin's Wolfaria, Gengenbach offered his unique take on a Protestant utopian state in the two pamphlets *Von Drien Christen*

(Gengenbach 1523a) and *Anzeigung ze eroberen die Türcky* (Gengenbach 1523b). In *Von Drien Christen*, three Christians from different corners of Europe find themselves engrossed in a spirited conversation. The trio consists of a noble servant (*Edelknecht*) from Mainz, a merchant from Bohemia, and another merchant from the fictional town of Novomontan, located in the southeastern parts of Europe. Their exchange begins with the nobleman from Mainz, who bemoans his plight. Once a respected figure, he now finds himself reduced to the status of a *Raubritter*, a robber knight. The Church has been, he complains, systematically stripping the German nobility of its rights and possessions, leaving them with nothing but a tarnished reputation and a life of servitude.

The Bohemian Christian from Pilsen listens intently and then takes his turn. A former advocate of Jan Hus (c. 1370–1415) and John Wycliffe (c. 1328–1384), he has become deeply conflicted about the reformers' legacies. He claims that the efforts of Hus have wrought more harm than good, leaving Bohemia caught in a precarious position. Straddling the divide between the Roman Church and the burgeoning Protestant movement, Bohemia belongs to neither, teetering on the brink of religious and social fragmentation.

Touched by their stories, the third and final merchant offers a glimpse of hope: the history of his hometown Novomontan. According to the merchant from Novomontan, his hometown once also suffered from profound religious and moral decline, with the clergy exploiting the common people and the nobility even more egregiously than in Mainz and Bohemia. The misery was unbearable until the war with the Ottoman Empire brought unexpected relief: as the war raged, monasteries were sold off to make quick money, which significantly weakened the clergy's stranglehold. When all battles were lost nevertheless, Novomontan came under Ottoman rule, though Christians were granted religious freedom.

This newfound freedom proved surprisingly fertile ground for reform. Liberated from the traditional structures and the suffocating control of Rome, Novomontan dissolved the remaining monasteries, secularized Church property, and took control over priests' salaries, democratizing all ecclesiastical decisions. A Church by the parish and for the parish emerged, achieving significant reforms without disrupting the social or political order. Under Ottoman rule, the merchant explains, Novomontan accomplished what the Holy Roman Empire could not: genuine Church reform and the establishment of social justice. Inspired by these unique events, the merchants from Mainz and Bohemia conclude that the people of Novomontan were the only true Christians left in all of Europe.

Shortly after *Von Drien Christen*, Gengenbach revisited the utopian vision of Wolfaria in his 1523 pamphlet *Anzeigung ze eroberen die Türcky*. The subtitle reveals the plot: *How the Island of Mahumeta was Conquered by the Empire of Wolfaria*. Once again, the story is constructed as a conversation between two merchants: a Greek merchant informs a German merchant about the military success of the so-called Order of Wolfaria. In an attempt to atone for centuries of exploitative behavior against the people and nobility, the clergy of Wolfaria had formed an army—the Order of Wolfaria—to fight the Turks and liberate the country from the Ottoman threat. The clerical effort was met with success. Not only did the order defeat the Ottoman troops, but they also managed to evangelize the occupied territories after their conquest.

In Gengenbach's second depiction of Wolfaria, the Ottoman Empire lost any positive appeal. Rather, the empire reverted to the general threat that Europe perceived it to be at that time: a powerful enemy whose expansion into European lands seemed almost unstoppable. However, in his particular depiction of Wolfaria, Gengenbach offered a path to victory not through sheer military power but rather through catharsis. Victory over the Ottomans was achieved through atonement and the religious and political unity and determination that Wolfaria embodied. The utopian state and the Order of Wolfaria stood as a beacon of Christian virtue and unity, representing a true *res publica Christiana*.

Gengenbach's depiction of Wolfaria diverges distinctly from Eberlin's initial vision. If Eberlin's Wolfaria was a politically inspired Protestant response to More's *Utopia*, then Gengenbach's Wolfaria was a religiously driven Protestant response to Eberlin. Unlike

Eberlin, Gengenbach focused almost exclusively on ecclesiastical reorganization, paying little attention to secular matters.

Moreover, Gengenbach situated Wolfaria within real events and their perceived religious ramifications, namely the ongoing conflicts with the Ottoman Empire and the widespread anticipation of the end of days. In the early 1520s, the perception of the Ottoman threat had reached new heights in Basel, as it had elsewhere in Europe (i.e., [Miller 2018](#)). Many viewed the Ottoman Empire as God's scourge (*flagellum dei*), destined to punish sinners and infidels. The Ottoman armies were identified with Gog and Magog, the apocalyptic harbingers of the Antichrist. Their arrival would announce the end of days, making atonement a critical and pressing issue (see i.e., [Freidenreich 2023](#); [Smith 2014](#)). In Basel, the response to this perceived threat was multifaceted. The church bells rang every noon to remind everyone that the end was near ([Berger 2024](#), pp. 165f). Weekly special sermons in every church aimed to prepare believers for atonement and the impending apocalypse (ibid., p. 169). Broadsheets regularly informed about the progress of the Ottoman's troops. For many, the Ottoman threat was as much a spiritual and ecclesiastical challenge as it was a political one. They were convinced that only true faith and reform of the Church could withstand God's ultimate test.

Additionally, the heightened fear of the Ottoman Empire coincided with widespread anxieties over divine punishment, sparked by a remarkable rise in apocalyptic astrology. Some stellar constellations and unusual celestial events were increasingly identified as signifiers of the apocalypse, prompting a surge of prognostic writings predicting biblical catastrophes ([Barnes 2016](#); [Talkenberger 1990](#)). A notable example was the celestial phenomenon over Vienna in 1520, likely a halo, which sparked fear in German speaking territories of a new deluge, predicted by some to occur in 1524 (i.e., [Seitz 1520](#)).⁹ Gengenbach and his audience were well-acquainted with these debates and topics. After all, Gengenbach had written and published several prognostic texts himself. His *Wiener Prognostikon* ([Gengenbach 1520](#)) added to the growing list of writings concerning the Viennese sightings. His carnival play, *Der Nollhart* ([Gengenbach 1517](#))—performed by local burghers in Basel twice during the 1510s—was his personal interpretation of, and reference to, prominent prognostic writings such as Johann Lichtenberger's *Prognosticatio* ([Lichtenberger 1488](#)) and Wolfgang Aytinger's *Pseudo-Methodius* ([Pseudo-Methodius and Aytinger 1498](#)). Clearly, Gengenbach could rely on his audience's familiarity with these topics, weaving them seamlessly into his vision of Wolfaria.

Finally, to resonate more deeply with his local audience, Gengenbach wove his vision of a Protestant utopian state into the familiar fabric of Basel. Unlike Eberlin's Wolfaria, which had national ambitions, Gengenbach's Wolfaria was depicted as a city state like Gengenbach's hometown Basel, a member of the Swiss Confederation but also a free Imperial city. This subtle yet potent gimmick was a recurring theme in his writings. Gengenbach repeatedly embedded his writings in a familiar, relatable setting. His carnival plays typically featured recognizable contemporary characters, making his stories more relatable to his audience. Similarly, his utopian vision of Wolfaria mirrored the political and demographic landscape of Basel, leveraging local familiarity to convey his vision of religious reform. His ability to meld grand ideals with local realities ensured that his works resonated deeply within Basel and beyond, shaping discussions on reform and progress in ways that were both pragmatic and visionary.

Gengenbach's *Von Drien Christen* and *Anzeigung ze erobern die Türcky* showcases his exceptional skills for alluding to contemporary works and current (political) events as a means for his own purpose. His vision of Wolfaria was not merely a response to the pressing issues of his time—the Ottoman threat, apocalyptic fears, and divine judgment—but a nuanced synthesis that reached beyond surface concerns. By subtly weaving his vision of Wolfaria with other influential texts of the time, such as More's *Utopia* and Eberlin's pamphlets, Gengenbach created a rich tapestry of ideas that deeply resonated with his audience, as this article has illustrated. His engagement with the popular *Türckenbüchlein*—pamphlets on the Ottoman threat—and prophecies like the anticipated deluge of 1524

underscore his utilization of contemporary anxieties. In crafting his own vision of Wolfaria, Gengenbach aimed not just to acknowledge these fears but to reinterpret them through a Protestant lens. His vision of a utopian state thus was a reflection of his ability to harness print media as a dynamic tool, conveying one simple message: the remedy to all existential challenges lay in Protestant principles.

5. Conclusions

Gengenbach is a vivid example of the translation and transmission of Protestant thought on local levels. His employment of the vernacular, along with intertextual and political references, demonstrates that the burgeoning power of print media was not merely about the simple act of printing words on paper. It rested on a profound understanding of how this relatively new medium could connect with, and build upon, traditional oral and performative characteristics and traditions. Accordingly, Gengenbach's works transcended mere literary or artistic creations. They were meticulously crafted tools designed to communicate complex political, theological, and religious ideas to a predominantly illiterate audience. Once Gengenbach had embraced the Reformation movement, his goal was to shape, translate, and transmit Protestant ideas effectively, targeting and engaging a curious and receptive but unlearned audience. By blending the vernacular as well as traditional concepts of oral and performative tradition with the advantages book printing offered, Gengenbach epitomized the potential of print media as a catalyst for religious reform as well as political and theological commentary. In doing so, he established himself as a prominent and important voice of the early Reformation in Basel.

Gengenbach is not a unique or singular example. From the early work of Robert Scribner to the more recent research by Thomas Kaufmann, scholarship has traditionally emphasized the symbiotic relationship between the Reformation movement and book printing (Kaufmann 2019, 2022; Scribner 1981). In recent years, the dominant focus has typically been on towering figures, leaving many protagonists of the Reformation unnoticed. In the local context of Basel, for instance, there were figures like Stefan Stör (–1529), a priest who married in 1523 and was among the first to promote Protestant thought on Basel territory (Fridrich 2001; Von Greyerz 2000). There was also Wilhelm Reublin, who was expelled from Basel for his Reformation sermons as early as 1521, eventually emerging as one of the leading figures of the Swiss Anabaptist movement (i.e., Bühler 2008; Burnett 2016; Stayer 1978). And then there was Gengenbach.

Remarkably, many of these figures, including Gengenbach, have received some notable attention in the past but have vanished almost entirely from recent research. Exploring new directions in scholarship sometimes means revisiting old but forgotten paths to reconsider the local dynamics and broader implications of the Reformation. Gengenbach is certainly one of those forgotten paths that deserves to be revisited.

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Notes

- ¹ For more about the book printing in the sixteenth century see i.e., (Giesecke 1991; Kaufmann 2019; Pettegree 2010; Würigler 2009).
- ² For a comprehensive and the most recent study of Gengenbach's biography and printing activity see (Prietzl 1999). For further reading see (Berger 2023, 2024, pp. 66–73; Goedeke 1856; Lendi 1926; Plotke 2018; Raillard 1939; Singer 1901).
- ³ Gengenbach's most successful carnival play was *Die X alter dyser welt* (Gengenbach 1511/15). The play was reprinted at least seventeen times (see Naylor 2002, p. 298).
- ⁴ One of Gengenbach's most detailed critiques of idolatry can be found in *Der Ewangelisch burger* (Gengenbach 1523c).
- ⁵ For more about the Basel Reformation see i.e., (Burnett 2006, 2016; Christ-von Wedel 2017; Moeller 1991; Sandl 2016).
- ⁶ For more about the Reformation and the voice, see Jan-Friedrich Missfelder's ongoing project *Macht der Stimme—Vocal Power* (University of Basel).
- ⁷ See note 5.
- ⁸ The chronology in which Eberlin produced and Gengenbach published the fifteen pamphlets is still a debated topic. See, i.e., (Dipple 1996, p. 45f).
- ⁹ For more about Alexander Seitz, see Seraina Berger's ongoing dissertation project *Religious Vocation and Medical Profession. The Reformation Worlds of Alexander Seitz* (c. 1470–1545) (University of Geneva).

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