

**MARTIN LUTHER AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE:  
LESSONS FOR JEWISH MINISTRY TODAY**

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**PRESENTED TO:  
THE LAUSANNE CONSULTATION ON JEWISH EVANGELISM  
NORTH AMERICAN ANNUAL CONFERENCE  
FEBRUARY 27-MARCH 1, 1995  
LAS VEGAS, NV**

# **MARTIN LUTHER AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE: LESSONS FOR JEWISH MINISTRY TODAY**

## **Introduction**

Ask the average Jewish person today about Martin Luther and you will invariably evoke a negative response. He was no friend of the Jews. He was anti-semitic. His teaching fueled the Nazi propaganda. These are the typical responses. Luther wrote five major treatises on the subject of the Jewish people. That Jesus Christ Was Born A Jew (1523) was written early in his career. Against the Sabbatarians (1538), On the Jews and Their Lies (1543), On the Ineffable Name and Christ's Lineage (1543), and On the Last Words of David (1543) were all written in his later career. In addition he referred to the Jewish people in his Table Talks and in several sermons. The content and tone of the later four treatises are definitely anti-Jewish.

How do we in the Protestant evangelical world explain Luther's attitude and view of the Jewish people? Was Luther anti-semitic? Luther's influence on Christianity and Western culture is enormous. It is reputed that Luther is the most prolific writer in human history. The Church is called to be winsome in our witness to the Jewish people of Jesus the Messiah, displaying a genuine love for them as the gospel is shared. Do we rationalize to the point of explaining away Luther's behavior? On the other hand, do we simply condemn this great Christian leader without seeking to understand the context in which he lived and worked? This paper is one probe toward a clearer understanding of Luther and the Jewish people with a view toward drawing lessons especially for Christians today who work in Jewish ministry and evangelism.

## Jewish-Christian Relations in Europe on the Eve of the Reformation

Luther was born into a context of both theological and popular hostility toward the Jews. Since Christianity became the state religion in the fourth century, Jews were tolerated as the only anomaly in the otherwise seamless robe of Christendom. They were, however, not allowed to own land or be members of guilds and so were forced into usury and the finance business as about the only alternative to serfdom. In the medieval world they functioned as a pariah people, tolerated because of the negative example they provided by their suffering to the truth of Christianity (or at least the Church's reigning theology) and as a demonstration of God's wrath on infidels.

An elderly Jewish lady, a Holocaust survivor, once told me that one can describe the history of the European attitude to the Jews thus: the first stage was: *"You cannot live among us as Jews,"* then it was *"You cannot live among us,"* and finally it was *"You cannot live"* (i.e. the "Final Solution"). This is a roughly accurate description of the attitude toward and treatment of the Jews by Christendom in European history.

It is more generally known that in the year 1492, when Luther was nine years old, all the Jews were expelled from Spain. But the fifteenth century as a whole was very difficult for the Jewish people. They were expelled respectively from Austria (1421), Cologne (1424), Saxony (1432), Speyer (1435), Augsburg (1440), and Wurzburg, Magdegurg, Nuremburg, Esslingen and Ulm by 1499 (Edwards 1983:118).

In the year 1510, when Luther was 27 and already an Augustinian monk, 38 Jewish people were executed in Berlin on the charge of "Desecration of the Host"<sup>1</sup>.

The medieval stereotype of the Jews carried many superstitions to the effect that the Jews poisoned wells, kidnapped Christian children to take their blood for the Passover ritual, that they had a stench, they had horns and tails, they bewitched animals, destroyed crops, and other such things. Johann Eck, Doctor of Theology at the University of Ingolstadt and Luther's most prominent Catholic opponent, wrote a treatise in 1541 Refutation of a Jew-Book in Which a Christian, to the Dishonor of All Christendom, Claims That Injustice is done the Jews in the Accusation That They Murder Christian Children (Edwards 1883:120). This was to refute an anonymous treatise (most probably written by Andreas Osiander, a Lutheran Reformer) defending the Jews against this charge of ritual murder. Eck sought to prove that all the charges of ritual murder and superstitions were indeed true. These were the convictions of a highly educated Christian scholar.

It was in this context of suspicion and hostility to the Jewish people that Luther lived and worked. These were the accepted views and attitudes within his social reality. All humans are embedded in a certain socio-cultural fabric with its accompanying worldview themes.

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1. The Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation holds that the Communion bread becomes the body of Jesus in the sacrament. From the 13th century it was the general belief that the Jews, due to their hatred of Jesus, desired to recrucify him. They did this by stealing the wafers and sticking knives and needles into them, which wafers would then bleed. Many Jews were tortured to get them to confess to this crime and were brutally executed.

The question for all is how far a person can transcend and shape that fabric and how much will one remain a product and reflection of that fabric.

### The Early Luther (1483-1523)

Luther was influenced by the Hebraist movement initiated by the humanists. Nicholas of Lyra (1279-1340) a French Franciscan, is an important link between the Reformation and the Middle Ages. Lyra, as he is called, learned Hebrew and also the exegetical methods of "Rashi" (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchak). This method of exegesis, which relied more on a literal interpretation than the traditional allegorical method, was taught at the University of Erfurt when young Martin Luther enrolled there in 1501. There is no doubt that Luther depended on Lyra in his exegetical method. There was a well known jingle which expresses this indebtedness,

*"Si Lyra non lyrasset,  
Luther non saltasset."*

*"If Lyra had not piped,  
Luther had not danced"*

(as quoted in Bevan and Singer  
1928:307)

Johannes Reuchlin was a Christian Hebraist and philologist who later held the Chair of Hebrew at the University of Tübingen (1521-22). Luther supported him in his controversial stand against the burning of the Talmud and other Jewish writings. One of Reuchlin's students who was also his nephew was Philip Melancthon, Luther's theological colleague.

Often these Hebraists, however, were more interested in the Hebrew language and literature for scholarly reasons that they were in Jewish people as persons.

Despite the heritage of suspicion and hostility, Luther's first treatise on the Jews was remarkably sympathetic and respectful of the Jewish people. In his That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew (1523) he was understanding and respectful of the Jews (See Appendix for excerpts from the treatise). He rebukes the Catholics for treating the Jews "*as if they were dogs.*" He states that it is no wonder the Jewish people do not want to become Christians when they see "*such idiots and blockheads ruling and teaching the Christian religion,...*" He says he himself "*would rather have become a sow than a Christian.*" Luther advocates that the Jewish be dealt with gently and by the law of Christian love.

In one instance he says of the Jews,

*"They are blood-relations of our Lord; therefore, if it were proper to boast of flesh and blood, the Jews belong to Christ more than we. I beg, therefore, my dear Papists, if you become tired of abusing me as a heretic, that you begin to revile me as a Jew."* (as quoted in Newman 1925:618).

Indeed he was accused and branded as a "Jew" and "Jewish Patron" by the Papists. His teachings won for him the title of "Semi-Judaeus" (Half-Jew) and "Judaizer" (Newman 1925:618). Luther was not ashamed of this. Luther was a non-conformist and rebel. He was able to transcend the accepted popular and theological views and reach out to the Jewish people in Christian love.

It is clear from the treatise that Luther hoped to win Jews to the Christian faith.

He thought that by treating them kindly and allowing them to compete with Christians in society and the market place, they would have an "*opportunity to witness the Christian life and doctrine.*" Clearly he had a missiological motive and hoped to win many Jewish people to the faith.

### The Middle Years (1524-1535)

As the Reformation movement in Germany developed, Luther became increasingly embattled while the movement itself became increasingly more politicized. In the year 1525, Luther took the side of the princes (the aristocracy) in the "Peasant's Revolt." But in Luther's view the radical reformers were becoming false prophets and fanatics. In 1529 he attended the "Marburg Colloquy" where he failed to reach an agreement with Zwingli. Luther became increasingly concerned to preserve the Reformation from its enemies. After the 1530's Luther's correspondence and published writings reflect this polemical shift. Luther finally reversed his position on resistance and supported the formation of the League of Schmalkalden in 1531 which would offer armed resistance to the Catholic Emperor (Edwards 1983:24).

By the mid-1530's Luther had encountered Jewish apologetic and polemical material and received reports of active Jewish proselytizing. He became convinced that Jewish blasphemy against Christ was not confined only to the synagogues but was becoming a threat to the public good (Edwards 1983:138). We must remember that at that time there was no separation of Church and State. Blasphemy was a civil crime. Luther and the Reformers held the same view on this as the Catholics.

Christendom comprised all of life in the realm or territory. Now of course it was Protestant Christendom versus Roman Catholic Christendom. But for Luther, it was a battle between the True Church and the False Church.

Sometime in the 1530's Luther became aware of a book written in 1530 by Antonius Margaritha, a converted Jew, entitled The Entire Jewish Faith. Luther liked it so much that he had it read regularly to him at table.<sup>2</sup> Written by a converted Jew (there was no concept of a Messianic Jew in those days), the book harshly criticized the practices of Judaism. This book would have reinforced his concerns that the proselytizing activity and anti-Christian doctrine of the Jews was a threat to the reform movement. Luther made comparisons between the rituals of Judaism and those of the detested Papists (Newman 1925:627).

Another significant occurrence in these middle years which served to affect a transformation in Luther's attitude toward the Jews was an encounter he had with three learned Jews who visited him in Wittenberg. Luther tells of this incident later in his treatise On the Jews and Their Lies,

*"Three learned Jews came to me, hoping to discover a new Jew in me because we were beginning to read Hebrew here in Wittenberg, and remarking the matters would soon improve since we Christians were starting to read their books. When I debated with them, they gave me their glosses, as they usually do. But when I forced them back to the text, they soon fled from it, saying that they were obliged to believe their rabbis, as we do the pope and doctors, etc. . . . later I found out that they called Christ a 'tola', that is , a hanged highwayman. Therefore I do not wish to have anything more to do with any Jew." (Luther's Works 1947: Vol.47:191-192).*

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2. When Luther later wrote his very anti-Jewish treatises, Margaritha was one of the sources he was most indebted to. Medieval and early modern Jews who converted to Christianity were often adamantly rejected all forms of Judaism. Due to their own identity struggles, together with the contemporary inability to separate Rabbinic Judaism from ethnic Jewishness, they felt a need to make a clean break with all things Jewish.



Many interpreters of Luther consider this incident to have been pivotal in the transformation of Luther's attitude to the Jews (Luther's Works 1971: Vol.47:191-192 fn.63). This may have been a pivotal factor for him emotionally, though many other elements must be taken into consideration as explanatory factors, as we shall see below.

### The Later Luther (1536-1546)

This last decade of Luther's life is the period least known and written about (except for perhaps his anti-Jewish tirades). Luther was not healthy during this period. He had bouts of depression, and periods of melancholy. He had hemorrhoids, dizzy spells, ringing in his ears, an open flowing ulcer on his leg, frequent constipation, and uric acid stones (Edwards 1983:9,15). He struggled with spiritual temptation, a death-wish, and outbursts of rage.

Luther experienced much disappointment with his fellow Germans over their lack of response to the Gospel and his preaching. He increasingly spoke of the ingratitude of the German people. Edwards relates,

*"Late in life Luther became frustrated with his home town, Wittenberg. In spite of his considerable preaching, people remained largely immoral, and the authorities took no action against them. Luther said he would rather 'eat the bread of a beggar, than torture and upset my poor old age and final days with the filth at Wittenberg.'" ("Christian History" Issue 39:11).*

Luther increasingly viewed the history of his own day in Apocalyptic terms. He was convinced that the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation were being fulfilled before his eyes. The pope was the Antichrist; the Turks were "Gog" (of Ezekiel 38) and the "Little Horn" (of Daniel 7); the radical and sectarian Protestants were false prophets, and the Jews were God's rejected and cursed people suffering under His wrath. Luther and his movement were the True Church engaged in the last great cosmic battle.

Let us look at a sequence of events and his last treatises about the Jewish people. In the year 1536, Elector Johann Friedrich issued a mandate forbidding Jewish people to settle or even travel in Electoral Saxony. Luther's refusal to intervene on behalf of the Jews very possibly indicates that he approved of the mandate (Edwards 1983:124).

In 1537, Luther received a letter from Josel of Rosheim (1478-1554), the leader and spokesman for Jewry within the empire. He wished to confer with Luther about the mandate against the Jewish people. Luther remained true to his earlier resolve not to enter into further dialogue with the Jews; he refused to see Josel or to intercede for him and the Jewish people. He exclaimed to his table companions,

*"Why should these rascals, who injure people in goods and body and who estrange many Christians [from Christianity] with their superstitions, be given permission? For in Moravia they have circumcised many and called them by the new name of Sabbatarians. . . . I'll write this Jew not to return."* (as quoted in Edwards 1983:125).

Luther at this point had not fully abandoned his missionary hope of winning some of the Jewish people to faith in Christ. He says in this letter that he intended to write a booklet, if God would give him opportunity, to see if he couldn't win of few from Josel's paternal tribe and bring them to their promised Messiah (Edwards 1983:125 fn).

In March 1938, Doctor Martin Luther wrote his next major treatise regarding the Jews, Against the Sabbatarians. This may be the treatise he promised to write in the letter to Josel. This work was an open letter addressed to his "*good friend*" Count Wolfgang Schlick. The count had sent word to Luther that Jews had been proselytizing in Bohemia and Moravia and had convinced some Christians that the Messiah had not yet come, that they should be circumcised, and that the Jewish law was eternally valid and should be observed by Gentiles (Edwards 1983:125-126). Luther's intent in the letter was to explain how the arguments of the Jews should be refuted by Scripture.

In this treatise, Luther's language is temperate for the most part. He uses logic and Scripture to demonstrate that the Jewish positions are false. The essence of his argument is as follows:

- The Jews have suffered fifteen centuries of exile and unprecedented suffering.
- This punishment exceeds any that is plausibly commensurate to any specific sin that they can name.
- The Jews say that the Messiah has not come; but God promised that the "*scepter will not depart from Judah. . . until Shiloh comes*" (Genesis 49:10), and that God would never allow David's throne to be unoccupied. Therefore:
  - Either: 1) Messiah has come and he is Jesus and he is occupying the throne of David,
  - Or: God has lied (because every other sceptre had departed from the Jewish people).

But, nay, on the contrary, God's Word had made them liars. Luther counsels his friend to press the Jews hard as to what sin they are aware of (other than rejecting Christ) that could have brought so severe a punishment on them. If they do not name it, "*You have made your point; they are employing lies and are no longer to be believed.*" (Luther's Works Vol. 47: 1971:67).

Luther here does not mean that the Jews are intentionally lying, but that they are employing lies and "*deceiving themselves*" (1971:78).

Luther appears in this writing to have concluded that converting the Jews had become hopeless. It seemed to him that God had forsaken them, leaving them to wander homeless. And if this was God's attitude, then one might with good conscience adopt the same attitude as God, and ignore the Jews (Gritsch 1993:38).

In 1543, he was willing to go a step further. Luther had said, "*I cannot convert the Jews* (he could only pray for them or curse them), *even as the Lord Christ could not do; but I can stop up their mouth so they must lie down.*" (as quoted in Newman 1925:621). He produced three treatises during this year which can best be viewed as one statement. In the first, On the Jews and Their Lies, Luther announced the second, On the Ineffable Name and Christ's Lineage, wherein he announced the third, On the Last Words of David. The last two amount to appendices to the first and draw upon the same sources.

The first treatise has four parts. In the first section, Luther refutes the alleged false boasts and teachings of the Jews; in the second section (the longest) he refutes Jewish exegesis of the Old Testament and contends for his Christological interpretation; in the third section he deals with the alleged slander and blasphemy of the Jews against Jesus and Mary.

He declares it is apparent from the Old Testament that the Jews are a besmirched bride, an incorrigible whore and wicked slut with whom God had to continuously scuffle, tussle and fight (Edwards 1983:129). Here he employs some of the grossest medieval stereotypes and caricatures of Jewish people in a very abusive and shrill tone.

Section four is the most notorious. Here he proposes seven measures of "*sharp mercy*" for dealing with the Jews and urges the princes to implement them. He evidently concluded that the soft mercy approach he advocated in 1523 would not work. These measures included burning their synagogues, confiscating their property and money, putting them to hard labor, and forbidding on pain of death the rabbis from teaching (See Appendix for excerpts from the treatise and the seven measures). Fortunately no Protestant prince ever put all of Luther's recommendations into practice. Though in May of 1543, Elector Johann Freidrich revoked some concessions he had made to the Jews in 1539, partly due to Luther's influence (Edwards 1983:135).

The second treatise discusses what Salvagus Porchetus had written in his Victory Over the Impious Hebrews in which he accuses Jews of claiming that Jesus performed all his miracles through the magical power of the "Ineffable Name" (a mystical kabbalistic practice). In short, Jesus was viewed as an evil magician (Edwards 1983:133). The first section of this treatise refutes these claims and contains the most vulgar and scatological of all Luther's writings on the Jews. He characterizes rabbinic exegesis as "*Jewish piss and shit, . . . Judas' piss, . . . Jewish sweat.*" Luther by this time had given up all hope that Jews would be converted. "*A Jewish heart,*" he said, "*is as hard as a stick, a stone, as iron, as a devil.*" (as quoted in Gritsch 1993:38).

The second section is much more restrained and designed to refute rabbinic exegesis and their claim that Jesus could not be of the tribe of Judah because Matthew traces his genealogy to Joseph not to Mary (Edwards 1983:132).

The third treatise is not as polemical. It is an exegetical discussion of passages in the Old Testament where Luther uses his Christocentric hermeneutic to demonstrate the doctrine of the Trinity and Incarnation.

One of Luther's Table Talks in his later life discussing the Jews is horribly violent,

*"There are sorcerers among the Jews, who delight in tormenting Christians, for they hold us as dogs. Duke Albert of Saxony well punished one of these wretches. A Jew offered to sell him a talisman, covered with strange characters, which he said effectually protected the wearer against any sword or dagger thrust. The duke replied: 'I will essay thy charm upon thyself, Jew,' and putting the talisman around the fellow's neck, he drew his sword and passed it through his body. 'Thou feelest, Jew!' said he, 'how 'twould have been with me, had I purchased thy talisman?'" (Table Talk DCCCXVIII Hazlitt Trans. pp.430-431).*

This intense hostility Luther bore the Jews continued to the end of his life and even found violent expression in his last public sermon, Admonition Against the Jews, preached just days before his death in 1546. The Jews were "*dogs*" (we remember he had rebuked the Catholics for thinking of and treating them this way in 1523). What he had once preached to others not to do, he was now doing. "*We are at fault for not slaying them*" he fumed shortly before his death (as quoted in Gritsch 1993:39).

Summary and Analysis of Causal Factors  
in the Later Luther's Views and Attitude  
Toward the Jewish People:  
Lessons for Today

Some have sought to attribute Luther's harsh and vulgar polemics to his poor health and/or senility. This may have exacerbated some of his expression, but there is evidence in his treatises that he could turn on and off the vulgarity and abuse as it suited his purposes (Edwards 1983:19). It is overly simplistic, reductionistic and simply not accurate to explain Luther's views and attitudes as primarily due to the state of his physical and mental health in his later years.

We will here summarize the causal factors which explain the later Luther's views and attitude toward the Jewish people. The explanation are not meant to exonerate Luther except where misunderstanding may have caused us to see him inaccurately and hence judge him inaccurately. These causal factors are intended to provide a clearer understanding with a view toward drawing lessons for Christians who work with Jewish people today. It is hoped this may help us avoid the pitfalls into which Luther fell.

1) Luther was, as we all are to a greater or lesser degree, a "child of the times." He inherited an anti-Jewish tradition of suspicion and hostility toward Jewish people. Luther was not able to fully transcend the worldview and socio-cultural fabric of his times. In his later ferocious polemics he reverted to the old medieval stereotypes and superstitions about Jewish people.

**Lesson:** We are all children of our times and must be aware of this in order to continually work at transcending our socio-cultural fabric through biblical vision. We must acknowledge that we have blind spots, and therefore be tolerant of others who view reality through different cultural paradigms, while being open to have our own blind spots corrected and our vision broadened.

2) The Reformation movement, for which Luther rightly felt a great deal of responsibility, had experienced a shift in the 1530's from a revolutionary movement of ideologically committed individuals to a more conservative political movement led by rulers of territories and city states. Several radical reform groups were spinning off into heresy and fanaticism (at least in Luther's view). This affected Luther's polemics. For Luther, the Reformation needed to be consolidated and defended in the face of threats from four major enemies: the Turks and the Catholics (external enemies), and the Fanatics (his Radical Protestant opponents) and the Jews and Jewish exegesis (internal enemies). In this battle Luther began to suspect the Jews of being sympathetic with the Muslim Turks because they were both monotheistic but rejected the Trinity.

Luther felt paternal and pastoral concern to protect the Reform movement and Lutheran Christians from the wolves. There was a need to rally the troops and whip up the passions for the battles ahead. We note that the late treatises regarding the Jews were addressed to his followers, not to the Jewish people or anyone else. Putting the moral/theological issues aside for a moment it can be argued that pragmatically, for the success of the movement, the circumstances called for such treatises as Luther delivered (Edwards 1983:204-205).



**Lesson:** a) We must always be aware that political pressures affect all who are in Christian leadership. We must prevent contemporary political issues from compromising the moral and theological stance of the Church, and seek to prevent the confusion or fusion of Church and State.

b) We must remember that our real warfare is spiritual, and not with other human beings. *"We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against . . . the principalities and powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms"* (Ephesians 6:12). In this warfare, the *" . . . weapons of our warfare are not the weapons of the world. . ."* (II Corinthians 10:4).

3) The later Luther's "Apocalypse Now" theology and worldview fueled the issues in point #2 above and in turn those issues fueled his apocalyptic vision. He truly believed he was living in the very last days, on the eve of the Last Judgement. The Pope was the Antichrist, the Turks were Gog and Magog, the Radicals were the false prophets and the Jews were God's rejected and cursed people upon whom His wrath rested, the Synagogue of Satan. He was involved in the Last Battle, and it was a bitter fight between the Whore and Babylon and the True Church of Overcomers (Luther and his movement). The battle therefore took on all the grotesque imagery of the Book of Revelation. Luther considered foul language an appropriate weapon to combat evil (Gritsch 1993:35). His treatises against the Jews were not his most vitriolic. His attack on the papacy in his Against the Papacy at Rome, Founded by the Devil was the most vulgar, venomous and scatological of all his polemical works.

**Lesson:** In every age, including our own, there is the chiliastic tendency of seeing contemporary events in eschatological terms. Napoleon Bonaparte was also viewed by many Christians as the Antichrist, as was Hitler later, Henry Kissinger, Mikhail Gorbachev, Saddam Hussein, etc. We must be extremely careful in our hermeneutics when we approach the apocalyptic literature.

4) Some segments of Luther's internal enemies, the "radical" Protestant sects, were taking on certain "Judaizing" motifs (Sabbatarian, Unitarian, etc.). This together with actual proselytizing of Christians by Jews fired Luther's ire.<sup>3</sup>.

**Lesson:** We must maintain proper, balanced polemics and apologetics which carry more light than heat. Ideas must be refuted without labeling, generalizing, stereotyping and allowing the issues to be personalized. In the market place of ideas, people must be allowed the freedom to believe what they will, without coercion or manipulation. Persuasion must be practiced with graciousness.

5) It appears that the central concern of Luther in all of this was to defend and maintain theologically and exegetically the Christian sense of the Old Testament and to refute the Rabbinic Jewish exegesis.

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3. The conventional wisdom, or at least a current remark at the time was that Lutheranism led to Calvinism, Calvinism led to Unitarianism, Unitarianism led to Sabbatarianism and Sabbatarianism to Judaism. This was typical of the belief that a Judaizing current was set under way by the Reformation which would lead eventually to Rabbinic Judaism (Newman 1925:621).

We note that the longest section in his On the Jews and Their Lies, as well much of On the Ineffable Name and On Christ's Lineage, and the whole of On the Last Words of David are devoted to this issue. It of course helped his polemics to attack the people who were the proponents of the views he was fighting, but his issue with the Jews was theological not racial. Luther identified a Jew by his/her religious beliefs, not by his/her race. Thus it is inaccurate and inappropriate for racial anti-Semites to claim Luther as a patron of their cause<sup>4</sup>.

**Lesson:** Our theological understanding of the relationship of continuity between the Old and New Testaments is crucial. Luther was correct in contending for a Christological hermeneutic vis-a-vis the Old Testament. In the interest of both obtaining credibility with the Jewish community and in not allowing the Jewish roots of Christian faith to be undermined, we must hold to a responsible exegesis and theology of the Old Testament which avoids the rabbinic approach on the one hand and the Marcionite approach on the other hand<sup>5</sup>.

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4. Racist anti-semitism is a concept foreign to the Sixteenth Century. It was not until the nineteenth century French cultural anthropologist, Alphonse Gobineau, held that humankind consisted of "Semites" and "Aryans" were Semites considered racially inferior (Gritsch 1993:39). The term "anti-semitism" was coined in 1879 by a German agitator, Wilhelm Marr, to designate anti-Jewish campaigns then appearing throughout Europe (Gade 1981:7).

5. In the second century, Marcion stressed the radical discontinuity between the Old Testament and the God of the Old Testament (which he saw as inferior) and the New Testament and the God and Father of Jesus Christ (which he saw as superior). The Marcionite canon accepted only Luke and the Pauline epistles; everything else was inferior because it was too Jewish. This can be regarded as a form of theological anti-semitism.

6) Luther's seven harsh recommendations to the princes of section four of On the Jews and Their Lies must be understood in light of two factors. The first is that the Protestant Reformation had not yet transcended the fusion of Church and State that characterized the medieval Church. Thus, to Luther, the Jewish "*blasphemy*" and false teaching as well as their involvement in usury was a threat to the public social order. Luther believed that political stability was necessary for the success of his movement.

Secondly, it must be seen as a strategy, a "*rough mercy*" as he called it, that might save a few Jews from the flames of hell (Edwards 1983:138-139). His earlier "*soft mercy*" approach (expressed in his treatise of 1523) he perceived as a failure and only made the Jews worse and worse.

**Lesson:** As above (in 2.a) we must differentiate between the realms of Church and State. Each has its own proper sphere of authority and methods appropriate to that authority. It is wrong for the Church to enforce its views through force of arms or coercion. It is wrong for the State to try people for heresy as a civil crime. Our own American First Amendment to the Constitution cannot be excelled here, "*Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or denying the free exercise thereof.*"

7) There was definitely a sense of personal disappointment and frustration that Luther felt in that virtually none of the Jewish people came to faith in Christ through his movement and his efforts. He had early hopes and expectations that possibly the Jews would come en masse into the movement as the eschatological salvation of all Israel.

When this did not occur he was let down and became increasingly bitter at what he called the "*obstinacy*" of the Jews. The visit by the three learned Jews who countered his interpretations of the Old Testament (mentioned above) is an added element in Luther's negative emotional shift.

**Lesson:** We in Jewish ministry and evangelism must avoid an instrumental or mechanical approach to our work. We must not be so task and result oriented that we treat Jewish people only as potential converts. They are first of all human beings made in God's image and to be respected as such whether or not they ever accept Jesus the Messiah as Lord. We must maintain a forgiving and loving heart toward them so as to guard against a "*root of bitterness springing up and thereby troubling many*" (Hebrews 12:15). Our expectations and sense of self worth in ministry must come from God, and not from our performance or results in ministry.

8) An element that must be taken into consideration in these matters is what may be called the "Mystery of Israel and the Church." The apostle Paul wrote that he did not want believers to be ignorant of this mystery (Romans 11:25ff). Unfortunately, many Christian leaders in the history of the Church have been ignorant of this mystery. They have not stood in awe at the great realities of the Olive Tree metaphor of Romans 11. They have not fathomed the depths of the reciprocal relationship between Israel and the Church in the outworking of God's purposes in salvation history. Thus Luther, like many Church fathers before him and many theologians since, have applied a spiritualizing hermeneutic to Romans chapters 9 -11 and the passages in Ezekiel and Zechariah which speak of God's ongoing and eschatological purposes for the Jewish people.

The Apostle asks, *"Has God rejected His people? By no means!"* (Romans 11:1). Luther accepted the patristic notion of supercessionism, that all the promises of God to Israel had been transferred to the Church, the "New Israel" (a phrase never found in the New Testament).

**Lesson:** A proper understanding of Romans 9-11 will demonstrate that God has not eternally rejected the Jewish people, that he still has a corporate destiny for them, and that there has been throughout history a *"remnant chosen by grace"* (Jews who believe in Jesus as their Messiah). Jewish people can be won to faith in Jesus, and the Church is called to win them by *"arousing them to envy"* (Romans 11:14) by what they see the believers have in and through their faith in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus. Luther was correct in his early treatise in 1523 when he criticized the Catholics as being so offensive in their treatment of the Jews that it was no wonder at all that no Jewish person wanted to become a Christian. It is indeed tragic that Luther later fell into the same treatment and attitude to the Jewish people that did the medieval Catholic Church.

An additional element here is that sixteenth century Christians had very little understanding of issues of contextualization and indigenous churches that we now possess in modern missiological theory and practice. Nothing like the modern messianic Jewish movement existed or could exist in those days. Jewish people who did convert were then no longer considered Jews in those days. They were "former Jews." They were expected to renounce anything that had to do with Jewishness, including cutting ties with their families and taking a Christian name. The social and cultural barriers keeping Jewish people from Jesus were all but insurmountable.

This was as inconsistent as it was tragic, because Jewishness was defined as religious not racial. If they changed their religion, why could they not be still considered racially Jewish in their cultural identity, just as the Germans, the Swiss, and the Scottish retained their cultural identity even as they converted from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism? This was one of the tragic blind spots of the age.

### Conclusion

Martin Luther was not anti-semitic in the modern racist sense of the term. Tragically, however, his writings were grist for the propaganda mill of the National Socialist (Nazi) movement in Germany exactly four centuries after Luther. May we never see Martin Luther simplistically, either wholly condemning him or exonerating him. Luther's ultimate contribution to the history of Christianity is great, but sadly he also had great flaws and blind spots which mar his legacy. Let us all draw lessons from his life both positive and negative. God will reserve final judgement on Luther and us all. Let us all stand in awe and the fear of God.

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## APPENDIX

### Excerpt From Luther's Early Treatise That Jesus Christ Was Born A Jew (1523):

#### I. THAT JESUS CHRIST WAS BORN A JEW—1523

¶I will therefore show by means of the Bible the causes which induce me to believe that Christ was a Jew born of a virgin. Perhaps I will attract some of the Jews to the Christian faith. For our fools—the popes, bishops, sophists, and monks—the coarse blockheads! have until this time so treated the Jews that to be a good Christian one would have to become a Jew. And if I had been a Jew and had seen such idiots and blockheads ruling and teaching the Christian religion, I would rather have been a sow than a Christian.

For they have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs and not human beings. They have done nothing for them but curse them and seize their wealth. Whenever they converted them, they did not teach them either Christian law or life but only subjected them to papistry and monkery. When these Jews saw that Judaism had such strong scriptural basis and that Christianity [Catholicism] was pure nonsense without Biblical support, how could they quiet their hearts and become real, good Christians? I have myself heard from pious converted Jews that if they had not heard the gospel in our time [from us Lutherans] they would always have remained Jews at heart in spite of their conversion. For they admit that they have never heard anything about Christ from the rulers who have converted them.

I hope that, if the Jews are treated friendly and are instructed kindly through the Bible, many of them will become real Christians and come back to the ancestral faith of the prophets and patriarchs. . . . [Luther considered the heroes of the Old Testament good Christians.]

I would advise and beg everybody to deal kindly with the Jews and to instruct them in the Scriptures; in such a case we could expect them to come over to us. If, however, we use brute force and slander them, saying that they need the blood of Christians to get rid of their stench and I know not what other nonsense of that kind, and treat them like dogs, what good can we expect of them? [Mediaeval Christians believed in a *foetor Judaicus*, a "Jewish stench."] Finally, how can we expect them to improve if we forbid them to work among us and to have social intercourse with us, and so force them into usury?

If we wish to make them better, we must deal with them not according to the law of the pope, but according to the law of Christian charity. We must receive them kindly and allow them to compete with us in earning a livelihood, so that they may have a good reason to be with us and among us and an opportunity to witness Christian life and doctrine; and if some remain obstinate, what of it? Not every one of us is a good Christian.

I shall stop here now until I see what the results will be. May God be gracious to us all. Amen.

Excerpt From Luther's Late Treatise On the Jews and Their Lies  
(1543):

II. CONCERNING THE JEWS AND THEIR LIES—1543

¶What then shall we Christians do with this damned, rejected race of Jews? [The Jews were rejected by God since they refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah.] Since they live among us and we know about their lying and blasphemy and cursing, we can not tolerate them if we do not wish to share in their lies, curses, and blasphemy. In this way we cannot quench the inextinguishable fire of divine rage (as the prophets say) nor convert the Jews. We must prayerfully and reverentially practice a merciful severity. Perhaps we may save a few from the fire and the flames [of hell]. We must not seek vengeance. They are surely being punished a thousand times more than we might wish them. Let me give you my honest advice.

First, their synagogues or churches should be set on fire, and whatever does not burn up should be covered or spread over with dirt so that no one may ever be able to see a cinder or stone of it. And this ought to be done for the honor of God and of Christianity in order that God may see that we are Christians, and that we have not wittingly tolerated or approved of such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of His Son and His Christians. . . . [Luther and others believed that the Jews cursed the Christians in their daily prayers.]

Secondly, their homes should likewise be broken down and destroyed. For they perpetrate the same things there that they do in their synagogues. For this reason they ought to be put under one roof or in a stable, like gypsies, in order that they may realize that they are not masters in our land, as they boast, but miserable captives, as they complain of us incessantly before God with bitter wailing.

Thirdly, they should be deprived of their prayer-books and Talmuds in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught.

Fourthly, their rabbis must be forbidden under threat of death to teach any more. . . .

Fifthly, passport and traveling privileges should be absolutely forbidden to the Jews. For they have no business in the rural districts since they are not nobles, nor officials, nor merchants, nor the like.

On the Jews and Their Lies cont.

Let them stay at home. I have heard that there is a rich Jew riding around the country with a team of twelve horses—he wants to be a Messiah—and he is exploiting princes, nobles, land, and people to such an extent that important people look askance at this. [This was “the wealthy Michael,” court-Jew of Joachim II of Brandenburg, a famous commercial magnate of the time.] If you princes and nobles do not close the road legally to such exploiters, then some troop ought to ride against them, for they will learn from this pamphlet what the Jews are and how to handle them and that they ought not to be protected. You ought not, you cannot protect them, unless in the eyes of God you want to share all their abomination. . . . [Luther seems to be inciting the robber barons to attack the Jews on the roads. Michael, the wealthy Jew, was actually seized in 1549 by highwaymen acting as agents for some of the most prominent citizens of Magdeburg.]

Sixthly, they ought to be stopped from usury. [Usury means any degree of interest, not only an exorbitant rate.] All their cash and valuables of silver and gold ought to be taken from them and put aside for safe keeping. For this reason, as said before, everything that they possess they stole and robbed from us through their usury, for they have no other means of support. This money should be used in the case (and in no other) where a Jew has honestly become a Christian, so that he may get for the time being one or two or three hundred florins, as the person may require. This, in order that he may start a business to support his poor wife and children and the old and feeble. Such evilly acquired money is cursed, unless, with God’s blessing, it is put to some good and necessary use. . . .

Seventhly, let the young and strong Jews and Jewesses be given the flail, the ax, the hoe, the spade, the distaff, and spindle, and let them earn their bread by the sweat of their noses as is enjoined upon Adam’s children. For it is not proper that they should want us cursed *Goyyim* [Gentiles] to work in the sweat of our brow and that they, pious crew, idle away their days at the fireside in laziness, feasting, and display. And in addition to this, they boast impiously that they have become masters of the Christians at our expense. We ought to drive the rascally lazy bones out of our system.

If, however, we are afraid that they might harm us personally, or our wives, children, servants, cattle, etc. when they serve us or work for us—since it is surely to be presumed that such noble lords of the world and poisonous bitter worms are not accustomed to any work and would very unwillingly humble themselves to such a degree among the cursed *Goyyim*—then let us apply the same cleverness [expulsion] as the other nations, such as France, Spain, Bohemia, etc., and settle with them for that which they have extorted usuriously from us, and after having divided it up fairly let us drive them out of the country for all time. For, as has been said, God’s rage is so great against them that they only become worse and worse through mild mercy, and not much better through severe mercy. Therefore away with them. . . .

To sum up, dear princes and nobles who have Jews in your domains, if this advice of mine does not suit you, then find a better one so that you and we may all be free of this insufferable devilish burden—the Jews.

From the Yale Collection of German Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library:



**HATRED UNLEASHED:** A German mob terrorizes the Jewish section of a city in the early 1600s. In Luther's era, Jews were widely feared and hated and expelled from many regions. Unlike many people, however, Luther opposed t<sup>h</sup> Jews for theological reasons rather than cultural ones. To him, the Jews were convinced heretics, and the law provided that such blasphemers should be expelled.

As Taken From: Christian History (Issue #39) p. 39)