



Martin Luther and the Jews: Context and Content*

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Theology Today

2017, Vol. 74(3) 215–224

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DOI: 10.1177/0040573617721911

journals.sagepub.com/home/ttj



Abstract

The subject of the Jews and Judaism was central to much of Martin Luther's writings and thought. While important for and informed by his own developing theology, Luther's treatment of the Jews and Judaism also drew from a well of religious and historical sources and must be placed into several contexts. On the 500th anniversary of Luther's 95 Theses, this article provides an overview and explores the complexities of Luther's attitudes towards Jews and Judaism.

Keywords

Martin Luther, Jews, Judaism, Reformation, early modern Germany, Anti-Judaism

Historical Contexts

As part of the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of the 95 Theses various academic conferences and public programs have explored a wide range of Luther's theology and historical development. While not directly related to the primary focus on the 95 Theses, Luther's writings about Jews and Judaism have garnered some attention. The topic, as it turns out, is quite complex, cutting to the core of some of Luther's thought and resonating in various ways since the sixteenth century.¹

*This article is based on a lecture delivered at the Morgan Library on November 13, 2016 and an associated essay, "Martin Luther, the Jews, and Judaism: Theology and Politics in Context," published in the exhibition catalog *Martin Luther and the Reformation* (2016), 331–39.

1. A recent spate of books has examined Luther's writing about the Jews as well as the later circulation and use of these writings. See, for example: Thomas Kaufmann, *Luthers "Judenschriften": Ein Beitrag zu ihrer historischen Kontextualisierung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); Thomas Kaufmann, *Luthers Juden* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014); *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish*

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It is impossible to understand Martin Luther's position on and writings about Jews and Judaism, however, without exploring the contexts in which he wrote. These contexts include the historical perceptions of and interactions between Jews and Christians as well as Luther's own developing theological positions, which drew from late medieval thought and contemporary experiences and debates. These perceptions of Jews and the relations between Jews and Christians were conditioned by a well of religious ideas and images, which combined with more localized conditions and concerns that swirled far beyond Jews themselves. We also need to consider that although Jews were a tiny and often marginalized minority, late medieval and early modern Jewish-Christian relations were not always negative or one-sided.

Jews traveled throughout Germany as merchants in late Antiquity and in the early Middle Ages and a number of communities, such as that in Worms, developed in the high Middle Ages. In general, Jews found homes in old episcopal and trade centers, where they were granted some economic privileges and a degree of communal autonomy. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Jews were involved in the collection of tolls and taxes, as well as moneylending, in large part due to restrictions prohibiting them from other occupations.²

At the end of the Middle Ages, there were approximately 25,000 Jews in the German Empire, with the largest communities such as Regensburg and Nuremberg home to several hundred Jews, comprising between 1% and 3% of the total city population. Between 1350 and 1525, Jews lived in 1038 regions in the German Empire—some places contained merely a Jew or two, other places were full-blown communities in the structural, and hence legal, way of thinking. Jewish settlement was continuous throughout the later Middle Ages in about 40% of the regions (largely the biggest communities). Only 9% of these settlements, however, were continuous until the eighteenth century. A large majority of the settlements in the later Middle Ages were in cities (73%); while 12% could be found in small towns; and 15% in villages, 88% of those located largely in a band across the south and southwest.³

We can identify a few central themes in the Christian perception of and interaction with Jews in the Middle Ages. Drawing from a range of early Christian and medieval writings, Jews were depicted as blind to the truth of the gospel and the divinity of Jesus. A frequent representation of Judaism as a blindfolded old woman was juxtaposed with a fresh, young and seeing church. Jews were also represented as stiff-necked and set in their foolish and outdated ways. Jewish fleshliness and ceremonials were contrasted with Christian spirituality. Jews were polemically attacked as falsifiers of the Bible, through alleged tampering with the biblical text and

People: A Reader, ed. Brooks Schramm and Kirs I. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012); Dietz Bering, *Was Luther Antisemit? Das deutsch-jüdische Verhältnis als Tragödie der Nähe* (Berlin: Berlin University, 2014).

2. See Robert Chazan, *The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom, 1000–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and *ibid.*, *Medieval Stereotypes and Modern Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), for example.

3. See Dean Phillip Bell, *Sacred Communities: Jewish and Christian Identities in Fifteenth-Century Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

distortion through rabbinic interpretations. They were also portrayed regularly as “arrogant,” fashioning themselves as God’s Chosen People, when many Christian apologists viewed them as abandoned by God—a position apparently strengthened by their long diasporic existence.

An *Adversus Judaeos* tradition cast Judaism as antagonistic to Christianity. Throughout the high Middle Ages, stereotypes represented Jews as deviant and involved in magic, theft, and deception, and in need of Christian blood. One particularly grotesque image of the Jews imagined Jews involved in indecent acts with a pig—the Judensau images.⁴ What is more, slowly crystallizing elements of Christian doctrine set the scene for expanded anti-Jewish accusations, including host desecration and ritual murder.⁵

A number of church-wide councils also had significant legal impact on the Jews, restricting professional occupations, dictating dress, and forbidding Jews from holding public offices. Particularly after the start of the thirteenth century, rabbinic writings were extensively censored and attacked for perceived blasphemies against Christianity, resulting in forced disputations and the burning of the Talmud in several places.

Increased agitation against Jewish moneylending and usury combined with tense political, economic, and social conditions to stir up anti-Jewish sentiment. One particularly influential preacher of the period was Bernardino da Sienna, who asserted that the Jews were a plague attacking the body of the civic commune and all of Christianity:

Money is the vital heat of a city. The Jews are leeches who ask for nothing better than the opportunity to devour an ailing member, whose blood they suck dry with insatiable ardor. When heat and blood abandon the extremities of the body to flow back to the heart, it is a sign that death is near. But the danger is even more imminent when the wealth of a city is in the hands of the Jews. Then the heat no longer flows, as it does normally, towards the heart. As it does in a plague-ridden body, it moves towards the ailing member of the body; for every Jew, especially if he is a moneylender, is a capital enemy of all Christians.⁶

Late medieval German Jews were frequently accused of subverting the common good and they were caught amidst escalating political tensions between the nobility, the emperor, and the cities—manipulated, attacked, and pawned in a series of regional and urban expulsions that covered much of the German-speaking world and extended from the middle of the fourteenth until the middle of the sixteenth

4. Isaiah Shachar, *The Judensau: A Medieval Anti-Jewish Motif and its History* (London: Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts, 1974).

5. R. Po-chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven: Yale, 1988).

6. Cited in Robert Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), 24.

centuries. The lack of strong centralized government, a shrinking economy, and a variety of feuds and wars, left little chance for strong or consistent policies or protection. Among the most notorious physical attacks were the massacres associated with the First Crusade, late thirteenth-century pogroms, and attacks and expulsions during the Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that Jews and Christians in medieval Germany never had normal relations.⁷ Often Jews and Christians shared cultural, social, and even political, if not religious, identity. Even where Jews lived in physically separated areas from Christians there were unavoidable points of contact in business and everyday life.

At the same time, Jews were not necessarily passive receptors of relations with Christians. They could attempt to affect political decisions and they could articulate polemics against Christianity. Among the anti-Christian works circulating in Jewish communities were books of polemic, such as *Sefer Nizzahon*, which served as something like a handbook for disputations. Perhaps the most widely circulated pamphlet in late medieval and early modern German Jewish communities was a satirical and biting attack on Christianity and Jesus specifically—sefer “Toldot Yeshu”—which has survived in numerous hand-written copies.⁸

Luther's Attitudes towards Judaism and Jews

The subject of Martin Luther (1483–1546) and his relationship with Judaism and the Jews is extremely complex. Luther wrote in a tumultuous age. He himself wrote extensively on a wide range of topics, often in highly charged ways. Further, Luther's theology and its social and political ramifications have frequently been discussed since his own day. Luther's position regarding the Jews was shaped by a variety of factors. Complicating the matter, Luther probably met few Jews in person, even though there were small Jewish communities in or close to places that Luther lived at various times during his life. During his last days in his hometown of Eisleben, which was home to several dozen Jews, a brief encounter with local Jews in fact reveals that his image of Jews was culled more from a variety of sources and preconceived notions than by interactions with people. This encounter may have provoked a sermon in which Luther railed against the Jews:

... they daily blaspheme and slander our Lord Jesus Christ. Since they do this, and we know about it, we should not tolerate it. For if I tolerate in my midst someone who slanders, blasphemes, and curses my Lord Jesus Christ, then I make myself a participant in the sins of another [1 Tim. 5:22]. But if I already have enough sins of my own, then

7. See, for example, Dean Phillip Bell, “The Little Ice Age and the Jews: Environmental History and the Mercurial Nature of Jewish-Christian Encounters in Early Modern Germany,” *AJS Review* 32:1 (2008): 1–27.

8. Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson, and Yaacov Deutsch, eds., *Toledot Yeshu* (“The Life Story of Jesus” Revisited: A Princeton Conference) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

you lords should not tolerate them but drive them away. If, however, they convert, give up usury, and receive Christ, then we will gladly regard them as our brothers.⁹

Although he called for, and is often credited with fueling, exclusionary territorial policies in parts of Germany (particularly in the 1530s and 1540s) and although his later writings contain some recommendations for anti-Jewish actions, Jews themselves were generally not a *practical* concern for Luther. Rather, Jews and Judaism formed part of a larger theological problem for Luther. From biblical exegesis to daily conversation, Luther's writings about Jews and Judaism stretch from his earliest works on the Psalms in 1513/1514, to just three days before his death in 1546. Like the papacy, the Devil, Enthusiasts, and even the Turks, the Jews were a constant enemy fundamentally opposed to Christians and Judaism, therefore, provided an oppositional Other that helped Luther to define what, in his mind, were true Christian belief and behavior.¹⁰ While the language in his later writings is increasingly scatological and violent, his earliest writings are also infused with negative and anti-Jewish stereotypes and arguments.

In his first Psalms lectures from the middle of the second decade of the sixteenth century, for example, Luther castigated the Jews both for crucifying Jesus and denying that it was a sin to have done so. He also lambasted them for what he saw as their greed, arrogance, and carnality. In his glosses to Psalm 78, Luther asserted that:

...God rejected them [the Jews] altogether according to the flesh and killed the standing of the synagogue and put the Law to death, in which they nevertheless think they are living, but they are not alive before God. The fact that their sacrifices and ceremonies and works are dead, this God did with the word alone, for He removed them and determined that they should come to an end. But since they were unwilling, the wrath of indignation was sent upon them.¹¹

For Luther, as for other Christian theologians, the most conspicuous Jews of the day were "we miserable Christians." Here the replacement of the Chosen People of the Hebrew Bible was assumed as it had been in traditional Christian thought.

But Luther did not simply criticize the Jews and assert the end of the Old in the New Dispensation. Throughout his writings, Luther reviewed biblical history to criticize the papacy and other enemies. Accordingly, Luther wrote that,

Moreover, through the worship of Baal there was depicted a monstrous form of righteousness and superstitious piety which prevails widely to this day. By means of

9. "An Admonition against the Jews" (1546) in *Luther's Works* (*LW*, hereafter), vols. 1–55, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vols. 56 and later, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–), here at *LW* 58, 458–59, presented in Schramm and Stjerna, 200–202.

10. See Thomas Kaufmann, "Luther and the Jews," in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, ed. Dean Phillip Bell and Stephen G. Burnett (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 69–104.

11. *LW* 11 in Schramm and Stjerna, 47.

this the Jews, heretics, and monks, that is arrogant individualists, worship the true God according to their own idea with most ridiculous zeal; with their excessive piety they are worse than the most ungodly, that is, for the sake of God they are the enemies of God...¹²

Some scholars conclude that none of Luther's writings should be read as an appeal to the rabble to harm the Jews, but rather as an attack on the authorities, demanding that they relinquish their self-serving and avaricious policies, as reflected in their relations with the Jews.¹³ Of course, the fact that his writing was directed to a Christian audience does not change the anti-Jewish nature of the texts or the practical import to which they could give rise when co-opted by civic and territorial rulers.

Early Works

In his 1523 *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* many have seen a "tolerant" Luther, who argued that the Jews should be dealt with gently and instructed with proper scriptural passages. Yet that text is really directed at heretics and written in response to allegations against several of Luther's own theological positions (most especially his position related to Mary), that is, not against or to the Jews themselves. The main themes of the text revolve around biblical interpretation, the Messiah, and criticism of the contemporary church. While Luther clearly hoped for some Jewish conversions, he never seemed to hold out hopes that massive conversions were even possible. In his 1521 "Magnificat," he had already written that, "Although the vast majority of them [the Jews] are hardened, yet there are always some, however few, that are converted to Christ and believe in Him . . . We ought, therefore, not to treat the Jews in so unkindly a spirit, for there are future Christians among them, and they are turning every day."¹⁴

Luther would continue this theme in *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*. Unfortunately, he observed, "Instead of this we are trying only to drive them by force, slandering them, accusing them of having Christian blood if they don't stink, and I know not what other foolishness. So long as we thus treat them like dogs, how can we expect to work any good among them?"¹⁵ Luther utilized the discussion of conversion as a convenient foil against the papacy specifically and Catholicism more generally. It was earlier Christians who had failed to provide Jews an adequate proclamation of the gospel.

The tone and focus of his discussion of Jews in this work was evident already in earlier writings, such as his lectures on Romans from 1515–1516. In those glosses

12. *LW* 25, 422.

13. Heiko A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*, trans. James I. Porter (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 117.

14. *LW* 21, in Schramm and Stjerna, 74.

15. *LW* 45, in Schramm and Stjerna, 83.

he noted that,

In opposition to this many people are proud with marvelous stupidity when they call the Jews dogs, evildoers, or whatever they like, while they too, and equally, do not realize who or what they are in the sight of God. Boldly they heap blasphemous insults upon them, when they ought to have compassion on them and fear the same punishments for themselves. Moreover, as if certain concerning themselves and the others, they rashly pronounce themselves blessed and the others cursed. Such today are the theologians of Cologne, who are so stupid in their zeal or rather their inarticulate and inept writings, they say that the Jews are accursed.¹⁶

Later Works

Luther's attitude toward the Jews seemed to become more radical after 1538, and particularly so in his last works. Luther's later writings are, in general, highly polemical and directed against all his enemies, not just the Jews. What is more, his later writings, for all their harsh and bitter vindictive, continue his earlier theological and exegetical work very logically. Already in the middle years of the 1530s, especially in his wide-ranging commentary to Genesis, Luther had increasingly engaged and criticized rabbinic commentaries to the Bible, stoking his negative attitudes towards the Jews. In commenting on Gen. 25:21, for example, he asserted that,

We acknowledge, of course, that it is a great benefit that we have received the language [Hebrew] from them [the Jews]; but we must beware of the dung of the rabbis, who have made of Holy Scripture a sort of privy in which they deposited their foulness and their exceedingly foolish opinions. I am advising this because even among our own theologians many give too much credit to the rabbis in explaining the meaning of Scripture.¹⁷

Although Luther had initially rejected accusations that Jews committed ritual murder and host desecration he later considered that such accusations could in fact contain a kernel of truth. The appearance of "expert" testimony from the writings of the Jewish apostate Anthonius Margaritha and the Christian Hebraist Sebastian Münster further encouraged Luther to adopt more negative positions about Jews. Still, in his last major writings that mention the Jews, Luther's theological concerns and positions had changed little from his earliest works.¹⁸

16. *LW* 25, in Schramm and Stjerna, 55.

17. *LW* 4, in Schramm and Stjerna, 130. See Kaufmann, "Luther and the Jews," 88.

18. On Margaritha see Michael T. Walton, *Anthonius Margaritha and the Jewish Faith: Jewish Life and Conversion in Sixteenth-century Germany* (Detroit: Wayne State, 2012). Regarding Münster and the Jews, see Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, "Sebastian Muenster's Knowledge and Use of Jewish Exegesis," in *Essays in Honor of the Very Rev. Dr. J.H. Hertz*, ed. I. Epstein, E. Levine, and C. Roth (London: Edward Goldston, 1944), 351–69; see also, Dean Phillip Bell, "Jewish and Christian Historiography in the Sixteenth Century: A Comparison of Sebastian Münster

His *Treatise on the Last Words of David*, for example, focuses upon questions of exegesis, the Trinity, and the Messiah, while criticizing the Jews and his perception of their arrogant notion of descent along the way. Like other anti-Jewish polemicists in the Middle Ages, Luther noted that the fact that Jews have been in dispersion and persecuted for 1500 years was itself testimony that they have been rejected by God, that the Messiah had already come, and that the Jews blindly refused to see such truth.

Among Luther's later writings that address the Jews is the infamous *On the Jews and Their Lies*.¹⁹ This work is perhaps the most significant one written by Luther on the topic of the Jews because of its frequent appropriation since the sixteenth century. There are four major parts to this work.²⁰ In the first part Luther spends a great deal of ink discussing questions of Jewish boasting regarding lineage, circumcision, and homeland. In the second part Luther attacks Jewish exegesis at length. In part three Luther relates reputed calumnies of Jews against Jesus and Mary, and in part four Luther offers his infamous advice to secular and ecclesiastical authorities on what should be done with the Jews, who cannot be truly converted to Christianity.

It is in these final recommendations that much of Luther's anti-Jewish reputation was forged. As noted earlier, one cannot discount the practical advice forwarded by Luther in these painful passages. Luther had indeed come to the conclusion that the Jews writ large could never be converted and so needed to be removed from Christian society. But this position was in most respects no different from his earliest position, in which he assumed a place for Jews in Christian society only upon true conversion to Christianity. In a certain sense, the advice proffered at the end of this treatise represents the practical culmination of Luther's theological position. The application of this advice in his own day and at various other times in German history has made Luther's disturbing rhetorical flourishes extend far beyond theological musings.

Reception and Implications

Even among other reformers of his day, Luther's vigorous and hostile anti-Jewish rhetoric of his later years was occasionally rebuffed and ignored. The reformer Heinrich Bullinger of Zürich complained of Luther's "lewd and houndish eloquence" and his "scurrility which is appropriate for no one and still less for an

and David Gans," in *God's Word for Our World: In Honor of Simon John DeVries*, volume 2, ed. J. Harold Ellens, Deborah L. Ellens, Rolf P. Knierim, and Isaac Kalimi (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 141–58. For a general overview of Münster's relationship to Judaism and his use of specific sources, see Karl Heinz Burmeister, *Sebastian Münster: Versuch eines biographischen Gesamtbildes* (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1969), 72–86.

19. For a recent glossed edition, see Matthias Morgenstern, ed., Martin Luther, *Von der Juden und Ihren Lügen* (Berlin: Berlin University, 2016).

20. See *LW* 47, introduction, 133–34.

old theologian.”²¹ Of course such criticism needs to be taken in context. Even critics of Luther shared his Christian anti-Judaism and aim of missionizing and converting Jews. And even those scholars who supported the preservation of Jewish writings, such as Johannes Reuchlin, were not particularly or necessarily philo-Semitic.²²

Aside from the realm of theology, Luther’s writings about Jews and Judaism could have significant political impact, at times leading to anti-Jewish legislation, for example the expulsion of the Jews from Saxony in 1536 and 1543. In Braunschweig, the publication of Luther’s *On the Jews and Their Lies* sparked mounting anti-Jewish policies.²³ The case of Braunschweig, however, also betrays the reality that anti-Judaism was nothing new to Reformation Germany and that Luther’s writings were coopted as a means to justify what clearly was a trend of increasing marginalization of the Jews for several years previously.

Contemporary Jewish responses to Luther were not surprisingly quite critical. Josel of Rosheim, the great Jewish *shtadlan* (intercessionary) of the sixteenth century, was intimately involved in attempts to combat expulsions of Jews and stop the circulation of Luther’s later anti-Jewish writings. According to Josel,

... as we have now seen with our own eyes in the case of a people that has established a new faith, with all kinds of leniencies in order to cast off the yoke. And their aim was to set upon us and annihilate the people of Israel by various and harsh legal measures and massacres. But God, seeing the affliction of His people, sent His angel, merciful kings, to give power and might to his majesty, the Emperor Charles—long may he live!—that he might prevail over them on many occasions, breaking their covenant and voiding their conspiracy... And by a miracle he triumphed and saved the people of Israel from the hands of the new faith established by the priest called Martin Luther, an unclean man, who intended to destroy and slay all the Jews, both young and old. Blessed be the Lord, who foiled his counsel and frustrated his designs and allowed us to behold His vengeance and many salvations to this day.²⁴

Josel was not universally opposed to Christian theologians. He engaged with some Christian humanists and even attended Christian sermons on occasion. Josel also at times leveraged Christian criticism of Jews for internal upbraiding and

21. Salo Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York: Columbia, 1969), Vol. XIII, 228.

22. See David H. Price, *Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011).

23. See Ries, “Zum Zusammenhang von Reformation und Judenvertreibung: Das Beispiel Braunschweig,” in *Civitatum Communitas: Studien zum europäischen Städtewesen: Festschrift Heinz Stoob zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Helmut Häger, Franz Peri, and Heinz Quirin, part 2 (Cologne: Böhlau, 1984), 630–54, here at 630–31.

24. *Sefer ha miknah*, trans. in Hayim Hillel Ben-Sasson, “The Reformation in Contemporary Jewish Eyes,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 4 (1969–70): 239–326, here at 291; the italics belong to Ben-Sasson.

moralizing, as he cautioned Jews to behave well in their interactions with non-Jews. But Josel was aware of the significant dangers inherent in Luther's later anti-Jewish writings and worked to limit their circulation and impact.

Conclusions

Luther has been interpreted in a variety of often opposing ways since the sixteenth century. His vision of the Jews was largely theological and rhetorical in nature. Jews formed part of a devilish group subverting the true Church, which also helped indicate the end of days. The concept of Jew was largely a prop for Luther's attacks on his own society, especially against those who he believed misused their authority. His view of the Jews and the primary issues associated with the concept of "Jews" remained remarkably salient and consistent throughout his career. Jews and Judaism were also important to Luther's core religious concerns, especially key issues such as: biblical exegesis, faith and works, lineage and descent, and apocalypticism.

There is no doubting that Luther was anti-Jewish in many of his writings, which could be extremely inflammatory. He intended his writings to have, and they certainly did have, social and political tones and implications. Of course, Luther was not the only theologian, Protestant or Catholic, whose works were used in such a way. The same was said of the south German reformer Martin Bucer and one of Luther's early Catholic opponents, Johannes Eck, for example. Luther must, however, be seen within a very anti-Jewish tradition that has been appropriated, knowingly and unknowingly, throughout the ages; he must also be read within the broader context of his own works. In the end, Luther's relationship to the Jews and Judaism provides a central lens through which to understand many of Luther's core theological concerns, even as it sheds light on the negative attitudes he and others shared about Jews and Judaism throughout history.

Author biography

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