

CHAPTER SIX

Martin Luther and the Jews

Hans J. Hillerbrand

Introduction

The topic "Martin Luther and the Jews" is by no means new.¹ The topic has been explored extensively over the years, especially since World War II, recently with particular intensity in conjunction with the Luther anniversary of 1983. Understandably, the foremost contributors to the discussion have been Lutheran and Jewish scholars. In fact, there has been an official consultation between the Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations and the Lutheran World Federation on the topic of Luther's legacy.² There are those for whom Martin Luther is a singularly insightful interpreter of the Christian faith, and they are profoundly perturbed by his strident and obscene anti-Semitic pronouncements, even as there are, among those who—indirectly or directly—suffered the consequences of Nazi anti-Semitism, some who are singularly sincerely searching for explanations.

The real topic is certainly not so much "Martin Luther and the Jews" as "Germany and the Jews." We are primarily jolted by the haunting question of whether Luther helped mold German thinking so that the way was prepared for the Nazi ideology that prevailed between 1933 and 1945.³ Thus, at issue is not antiquarian scholarly interest but a most relevant contemporary question.

The connection between Martin Luther and Nazi totalitarianism was quickly made. Karl Barth asserted in 1939 that Luther's mistaken political ethics helped cause the rise of

Hitler, this view was popularized in William Shirer's best seller *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*.⁴ One of the first major statements connecting Luther's anti-Semitism with Nazi totalitarianism came at the end of World War II with the publication of Peter F. Wiener's *Martin Luther: Hitler's Spiritual Ancestor*.⁵ The charges were broad and comprehensive and went beyond the strident anti-Semitic remarks of Luther's later years. Luther's treatment of the Anabaptists, his pronouncements on sexual morality, and his coarse language came under severe attack as a demonstration of the adverse impact of the German reformer on German mentality and history.

In my opinion, the broader context of Luther's historical image cannot be ignored. Martin Luther has always had—but particularly in the late nineteenth century—a "bad press." This has had to do not only with the notion of liberal Protestants that the reformer was medieval in his outlook, but also with the vitriolic attacks of late nineteenth-century papalistic Catholics, notably Denifle and Grisar, who argued the depravity of Luther as person and theologian. In a similar vein, Paul J. Reiter, a Danish psychiatrist, concluded that Luther was a textbook case of a manic depressive, who might have even suffered from an advanced case of epilepsy.⁶ Erich Fromm, in turn, viewed Luther as a classic authoritarian personality.⁷

¹Two recent monographs have extensive and useful bibliographies: H. A. Oebman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation* (Philadelphia, 1984), and E. W. Gritsch, *Martin—God's Court Jester: Luther in Retrospect* (Philadelphia, 1983). Other recent studies are J. Brosse, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden im Spiegel seiner Interpretation* (Münich, 1972); B. C. Stucher, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden: Eine Interpretation aus germanistischer Sicht* (Nieuwkoop, 1977); H. Kremers, ed., *Die Juden und Martin Luther—Martin Luther und die Juden* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1985); H. Lindner, *Martin Luther und die Juden* (Wuppertal, 1984). See also L. Siegel-Wenschkewitz, "Der Beitrag der Kirchengeschichte zu einer Theologie nach dem Holocaust: Christlicher Antijudaismus als Wurzel des Antisemitismus," *Concilium* 20 (1984) 413-16; E. L. Ehrlich, "Luther und die Juden," in H. Strauss and N. Kampe, eds., *Antisemitismus: von der Judenfeindschaft zum Holocaust* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985) pp. 47-65; A. Baumann et al., eds., *Luthers Erben und die Juden: Das Verhältnis lutherischer Kirchen Europas zu den Juden* (Hanover, 1984). The Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute may be used for a comprehensive annual bibliography.

²J. Halpern and A. Sorkin, eds., *Luther, Lutheranism, and the Jews* (Geneva, 1984), with papers by E. L. Ehrlich and M. Edwards.

³See Kremers, *Die Juden und Martin Luther*, esp. pp. 301ff.

⁴W. L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York, 1960) p. 236, "The great founder of Protestantism was both a passionate anti-Semite and a fervent believer in political authority."

⁵There was a vehement response from the pen of G. Rupp, *Martin Luther: Hitler's Cause or Cure?* (London, 1945). Recently, Rupp has summarized his point of view again: "Martin Luther and the Jews," *Nederlandsche Theologisch Tijdschrift* 31 (1977) 121-35.

Our topic can best be delineated by (1) summarizing Luther's writings on the Jews, (2) reflecting on their meaning, and (3) speaking about their historical impact.

The Historical Record

There is scholarly agreement that the early Luther spoke thoughtfully and positively about Jews. He supported the humanist Johannes Reuchlin and his advocacy of the study of Hebrew, the deep concern being the advocacy of open discussion.⁸ Luther's lectures on the *Book of Psalms* contain repeated references to the Jewish people, who were seen as a paradigm for human estrangement from God.⁹ Luther hoped for their conversion to Christianity, prayed for "Jews, heretics, and all people in error,"¹⁰ and counseled that "we should not treat the Jews in an unfriendly manner, for future Christians might be among them."¹¹ Only they, and not the Gentiles, have the promise that they will be forever "in Abraham's seed." In his tract *Concerning Married Life*, Luther wrote that "I may well eat, drink, sleep, walk, ride, buy, talk, and act with a pagan or Jew or Turk or heretic, even marry one."¹²

In his 1523 tract *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* Luther expressed optimism about the possibility of Jewish conversion to Christianity; but his main point was to stress that love must be foremost in all relationships, including Christian relations with Jews.¹³ On the common attitude of Christians towards Jews, he commented, "They have treated the Jews as if they were dogs and not human beings."¹⁴ Or again: "We must receive them cordially, and permit them to trade and work with us. . . . If some are stiff-necked, so what? After all, we are ourselves not such good Christians either."¹⁵ Luther's attitude was un-

⁶P. J. Reiter, *Martin Luthers Ummwelt, Charakter und Psychose* (Copenhagen, 1941).

⁷E. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York, 1941) p. 95.

⁸W. Maurer, *Kirche und Synagoge* (WA Bt. 1.7; Stuttgart, 1953) p. 89.

⁹WA 56, 46; 56, 199. See also the *Operations in Psalms* (1519-21), for example, WA 5, 427: "Therefore we must condemn the fury of certain Christians who think that they please God by persecuting the Jews with fierce hatred."

¹⁰WA 7, 226.

¹¹WA 7, 600.

¹²WA 10, II, 283.

¹³WA 11, 307ff.

¹⁴WA 11, 315.

¹⁵WA 11, 336.

doubtedly influenced by his optimism about the persuasiveness of the newly restored gospel. Accordingly, in his *Short Form of the Ten Commandments*, he urged his readers to pray for the Jews who might be converted and who should not be unnecessarily offended by Christian quarreling or harshness.¹⁶ For Luther the basic issue in Christian-Jewish relations was simple, and very much what it had been all along: Jews should convert to Christianity. In so doing, they would appropriate their own scripture in its authentic fashion.¹⁷ To be sure, Luther's tracts were an invitation to dialogue, but with a rather fixed notion of its outcome—namely, acceptance of the point of view presented, which was in general the standard stance of sixteenth-century religious colloquies.

Luther's major pronouncement on societal issues of 1520—his *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*—included no references to Jews or the "Jewish question." It would seem that for Luther the legal and social situation of the Jews in Germany and the Holy Roman Empire was not an important and ongoing concern. This attitude seems evident for the 1520s.

From the end of the 1530s onward, however, a different tone can be discerned in Luther's writings. There is less optimism about the possibility of Jewish conversion; and there is greater concern about evidence of Jewish religious vitality. Luther's most strident remarks about Jews come from the years immediately preceding his death, a fact that prompted Roland H. Bainton to remark that "it would have been better had Luther died before taking to the pen with these tracts."¹⁸ The most infamous pronouncement was the 1543 tract *Concerning the Jews and Their Lies*, though it is important to keep in mind that this was not an isolated publication.¹⁹ There was, in fact, a string of such writings—the tracts *Concerning Schem Hemphoras and the Genealogy of Christ* and *Concerning the Last Words of David*, as well as Luther's very last sermon, preached a few days before his death.²⁰

Concerning the Jews and Their Lies was, like many of Luther's

¹⁶WA 7, 226.

¹⁷WA 11, 315.

¹⁸R. H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York, 1955) p. 297.

¹⁹WA 53, 412ff.

²⁰The writings are found in WA 53, 579ff.; WA 54, 28ff.; and WA 51, 187ff. Luther's sermon has an appendix entitled "An Admonition against the Jews."

tracts, a polemical retort. A rabbi had written a forcefully argued tract against Luther's *Against the Sabbatarians*; he challenged Christians to convert to Judaism. Luther's response did not intend to be a "dialogue," but summarized for Christians the main tenets of the faith, as they pertain to the relationship with Judaism. Accordingly, Luther discussed such topics as circumcision, the Mosaic Law, the possession of Canaan, Jerusalem, and the Temple. The tract was a restatement of Christian tenets, foremostly delineated in terms of a christocentric interpretation of the Old Testament. This meant the repudiation of the Jewish claim to be the sole chosen people and their rejection of Jesus' messianic claim. Luther's language was shocking, if not obscene. One example suffices: "Now, what ought we Christians do with this rejected and damned people, the Jews? . . . We have to practice a fierce mercy in hopes that we can at least save a few of them from the glowing flames. Vengeance is out of the question. Revenge already hangs on their necks, a thousand times worse than we could wish on them."²¹ As to particulars, Luther proposed such ruthless measures as the burning of Jewish books and of synagogues, and manual labor for all Jews.

The theological themes of the tract had been stated before. What was new was the sharpness of tone as well as the appeal to the political authorities to suppress the Jews. These years of Luther's life were characterized by outbursts of anger and vitriolic pronouncements on his part. His remarks about Anabaptists or the pope were every bit as vitriolic—and obscene—as those against the Jews. The Jews were not a separate category in Luther's polemic; they were an integral part of those who misinterpreted or falsified the true gospel. And that included the Catholics, the pope, the Anabaptists, even the Turks.²² Quite consistently, Luther's anti-Catholic tract *Concerning the Papacy in Rome Which Was Founded by the Devil*, of 1545, vies with the anti-Jewish pronouncements for abusiveness of style and content, even as his less formal remarks about the Anabaptists—less formal, I believe, because he did not view them as

²¹WA 53, 522.

²²On Luther and the Anabaptists, see J. S. Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers against the Anabaptists* (The Hague, 1964). On Luther's later anti-Catholic polemic, see E. Gritsch, "Luther and the Jews: Toward a Judgment of History," *Luther and the Jews* (New York, 1983) p. 7.

a real threat—expressed the same substantive unwillingness to tolerate them. The differences were minor. Luther did not call for the involvement of governmental authority to deal with Catholics, as he did with the Anabaptists and the Jews. His basic explanation was that Catholics affirmed the fundamental tenets of the faith even as they were law abiding and not revolutionaries. By the same token, one might suggest that Catholics enjoyed political power at least in some places, thus raising the specter of retribution.

The Interpretation

The explanations for Luther's attitude toward the Jews have varied, his harshness eliciting universal condemnation and expressions of regret. In a thoughtful summary, Eric Gritsch has noted four lines of interpretation.²³

1. *The basic difference between the young Luther and the old Luther.* This point of view, which has echoes in other areas of Luther's thought (puzzling since the "young" Luther of the 1520s was almost forty years of age), holds that initially Luther was a friend of the Jews, but, under the impact of sundry influences, turned into a fierce opponent in later years.²⁴ Explanations vary. Political strategy may have played a role. Luther's early declarations of tolerance had been strategic moves, made when he himself was very much in need of political support. By the late 1530s Luther and his cause had become somewhat politically secure. Luther could afford to be candid, outspoken, and show his true feelings. And he did.

2. *Luther's apocalyptic world view coupled with his conviction of the imminent end of the world.* Since the end of the world was in sight, the time had also come for the conversion of the Jews.²⁵

3. *Luther's precarious health.* From the 1530s onward, Luther was subjected to chronic physical pain, severe problems with kidney stones, gallstones, and depressions. Not only was he rendered incapable of sound judgment, his whole personality may well have changed.²⁶

²³Gritsch, *Luther and the Jews*, p. 7.

²⁴The initial statement of this view was by R. Lewin, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden* (Berlin, 1911).

²⁵This argument is forcefully presented by H. A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism*, see esp. pp. 117ff.

4. *The essential theological consistency of the young Luther and the mature Luther.* Reading human history as sacred history, Luther saw the Jews as the chosen people who had rejected the Messiah, whose hearts God had hardened, and who were a pernicious influence on Christendom. They epitomized works righteousness, which meant that they were not reading their own scriptures authentically.

We may note yet another possibility explaining the change from the early 1520s to the early 1540s. Martin Luther was overpowered by his conviction that the gospel had been restored in his time and that it was within the reach of anybody, no matter how unlearned, to appropriate and understand it. No external authority, such as Church, council, or pope, was necessary, because the meaning of Scripture was simple and clear. Accordingly, Luther asserted in his famous declaration in Worms in 1521 that "his conscience was captured by the Word of God." That also was the meaning of his objection to the comment that Emperor Charles V suppressed the reform movement because he followed his conscience: Luther insisted that this was impossible, because someone in error did not follow his conscience.²⁷ It is assuredly a "poor excuse" if "someone has heard God's word for fifteen hundred years and always says 'I do not want to know it.' He will certainly 'pay for his guilt seven times.'"²⁸ Clearly, if the simple and self-evident gospel message was not accepted, something pernicious was at work.

Luther must be seen in the context of traditional Christian views of the Jews as well as sixteenth-century practice. Thus, Luther's statements have antecedents in the sordid tradition of medieval anti-Semitism. It has been pointed out that there was nothing new in Luther's statements, and, therefore, that tradition more so than Luther should be seen as the fateful legacy.²⁹ If anything, then, Luther should be faulted for not breaking

^{23a}See on this point H. G. Haile, *Martin Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (New York, 1980).

²⁷See W. Köhler, *Dogmengeschichte als Geschichte des christlichen Selbstbewusstseins* (Zürich, 1951) p. 55.

²⁸WA 53, 526.

²⁹See the remarks by Maurer, *Kirche und Synagoge*, pp. 103-04. In *The Roots of Anti-Semitism* Oberman makes the point that Luther was, in fact, more positive in his views than either Reuchlin or Erasmus. On Erasmus see G. Kisch, *Erasmus' Stellung zu den Juden* (Tübingen, 1969).

away more from the traditional legacy. However, Luther no longer gave credence to such traditional allegations as Jewish ritualistic murder, well poisoning, or the desecration of the host.³⁰ He called such allegations "fool's work." But he was not beyond gossiping—some of it quite vile—as, for example, in his *Admonition against the Jews*, where he observed that "if they could kill us all, they would truly do it, and, in fact, they do it quite often, especially those who pretend to be physicians."³¹

Provocatively, Heiko A. Oberman has recently suggested that the Jewish question was a central theme in Luther's theology.³² On one level, it clearly was not. In terms of the sheer quantity of Luther's writings, the Jews do not rank prominently at all. Yet, on another level, it undoubtedly was. Luther was consumed with the dualism between God and Antichrist, between grace and law, faith and works, and in that setting the Jews epitomized what stood at the very heart of Luther's thought: what is God—and how can we know him? In this light, Luther's theological observations about the Jews may be subsumed under four headings.

1. *The theological affirmation.* No equality exists between Judaism and Christianity. The former has been superseded by the latter. Jesus is the Messiah, the end of the Law, and this means the centrality of gospel and grace. The Hebrew Scriptures must be interpreted christologically. As people of the Law, the Jews epitomize an erroneous understanding of God, namely, that of works righteousness. Scripture has been fulfilled; the prophecies of the Old Testament have occurred; the Jewish religion has no longer any reason to exist.

Since the repudiation of all forms of works righteousness formed the pivotal core of Luther's theology, his repudiation of the Jews—as a theological entity—was categorical. The Jews were exemplars of false religion, as were Catholics, Turks, and Anabaptists. However, if a Jew converted to Christianity, he or she was fully a Christian, and no longer a Jew. Luther acknowledged kinship between a baptized Jew and a baptized Gentile, even as there was kinship between an unbaptized Jew and an unbaptized Gentile.³³

³⁰W. Biener, *Martin Luther und die Juden* (Frankfurt am Main, 1982) p. 177.

³¹WA 51, 195.

³²H. A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and Devil* (Philadelphia, 1985).

By the same token, one must be cautious not to overstate the point. The Jews were not only a people adhering to a certain religion, but also a people. Or, to put it differently, to be a Jew meant to be a Semite. Thus, the attack on the one was an attack on the other. If, moreover, as was the case in Spain, the sincerity of the Jewish conversions to Christianity was doubted, it was easy to be anti-Semitic, even though the real issue was anti-Judaism.

2. *The missionary impulse.* Especially in his early writings Luther stressed the obligation to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and the Jews, arguing the solidarity of guilt, judgment, and grace, of all people, Jew and Gentile. Some scholars have argued that Luther's call for conversion of the Jews in later years had, in light of his overpowering sense of the imminence of the end of the world, no real practical significance.³⁴ Still, the mandate "to preach the gospel," which had been recently restored, was thereby prominently expressed. Luther's strategy was to be friendly toward Jews and to accept them, so as to remove any barrier to the Jewish acceptance of Jesus. Luther also advised that Jesus should first be presented as Messiah, as foretold in Scripture, and only afterward as true God.

3. *The view of history.* For Luther the course of history vindicated his theological judgment about the Jewish people who had been unwilling to accept the Messiah. How could one understand the peripatetic homelessness of the Jews, and their chronic persecutions? Surely, he reasoned, it is because God had removed himself from them. The tensions between synagogue and church were for Luther not only a manifestation of specific tension, but also part and parcel of a larger struggle against the world in which the Church is engaged.

Intiguently, this view of history so expressed by Luther,

³³Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism*, p. 102. J. Friedmann's recent article "Jewish Conversion, the Spanish Pure Blood Laws and Reformation: A Revisionist View of Racial and Religious Antisemitism," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18 (1987) 25, demurs. See also J. Brosselet, "Luther und der Leidensweg der Juden" in Kremers, *Die Juden und Martin Luther*, p. 131.

³⁴To have pointed out the difference between the early and the later Luther in this regard was Lewin's major contribution. The most thorough analysis of the issue is by M. Stöhr, "Luther und die Juden," *Evangelische Theologie* 20 (1960) 157-82. An insightful statement is "Martin Luther und die Juden," W. D. Marsch and K. Thieme, eds., *Christen und Juden* (Göttingen, 1961) pp. 115-40, recently reprinted in Kremers, *Die Juden und Martin Luther*, pp. 89-108; see esp. 98, "Zwanzig Jahre später hat sich sodann das Bild völlig gewandelt."

runs counter to the reformer's "theology of the cross," that is, to the affirmation that God's presence and work in history is always "in hiding," always contrary to appearance and experience. Thus, the seemingly simple lessons of history are not at all the authentic ones. The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from Luther's "theology of the cross" surely would be that *sub contrarie* the suffering and persecution of the Jews testify precisely to a diametrically different reality, namely to their eternal election.

Still, Martin Luther argued, in line with the Christian tradition, that Jesus, who came as the Messiah of Israel, was rejected by his people. Accordingly, God concluded a new covenant with a new "Israel," while the stubbornness of the old Israel perpetuated the Law which was fulfilled, in fact, through the fulfillment of the promise—the coming of the Messiah. Israel appears as the manifestation of God's judgment and grace, even as God's working in history manifests the stubbornness of the Jewish people and the synagogue. There is no more promise for Israel. God is silent. Israel experiences the silence of God, which is his wrath. Luther noted: "And thus the wrath of God has come over them, about which I do not like to think, even as I have not been happy writing this book. With anger and sarcasm I had to remove the terrible insight from my eyes as I wrote against the Jews."³⁵ In his later writings Luther appears to have abandoned the notion of the permanence of Israel's eternal election. No longer is theirs a promise, Luther writes, in which they can find comfort.³⁶

4. *The charge of blasphemy.* Ironically, Luther shared with all Christian theologians of his time the notion that there could be no place for dissenters in Christendom. When Luther received word of alleged Jewish missionary efforts among Christians and about Christians who sympathized with Judaism, he concluded that the solidarity of the cohesive Christian society was challenged. Luther fully accepted the medieval concept of the "Corpus Christianum," the notion of the identity of the religious and civic community, the former imposing its will on the latter. Theological claims for truth were sustained by governmental authority. Therein lies Luther's medieval legacy,

³⁵WA 53, 541.

³⁶WA 53, 447.

which was of such fateful consequence for all dissenters, especially Anabaptists and Jews.

It is true enough that the Luther of the early years of the Reformation seemed willing to see society as a marketplace of ideas. In those years this was also an existential sentiment—after all, Luther's own cause was at stake—even as it grew out of his conviction that the clarity and simplicity of the Word of God, freely preached, would inevitably lead to its acceptance. The free exchange of ideas was thus bound to have only one possible outcome, the acceptance of the gospel by all. Luther's denunciation of civil liberties for the Jews paralleled his denunciation of religious and civil liberties for the Anabaptists, whom he preferred to be hanged or incarcerated, and for whom he conceded no place in a Christian society.

The discrepancy between the early and the later Luther is evident here. In his early pronouncements, Luther certainly viewed the Jews as enemies of the gospel. By 1543 he had declared the Jews to be enemies of society as well. The Jews were a mortal danger for the Corpus Christianum, no matter how much Luther eased the stridency of the worst of medieval anti-Semitism.

The Legacy

The legacy of Luther's thought in the centuries since the Reformation is every bit as important as that thought itself, if not in fact more so. Thus, a recent analyst of Jewish-Christian conversations has noted that "Hitler's program was but the crown and pinnacle of a long history of hatred toward the Jew, participated in (if not initiated by) those whose duty it was to teach their children the truths of Christianity."³⁷ Here is indeed the crux of the matter, which transcends the antiquarian interest in the theology of a historical sixteenth-century figure. The question is how Luther's influence can be traced through subsequent centuries.

One may argue that the line from the sixteenth to the twentieth century is not easily drawn, and that the roots of twentieth-century anti-Semitism lie in the nineteenth century. Luther's influence must be seen in a complex fashion.

³⁷H. Singer, "The Rise and Fall of Interfaith Dialogue," *Commentary* (May 1987) 51.