

Jewish-Christian Relations: Encounters Past and Present

The Reformers: Martin Luther and John Calvin

Expulsions
of
European
Jews

England (1290)

France (1394)

Spain (1492)

Portugal (1498)

Germany (1388-1519)

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

The architect of
the Protestant
Reformation



Luther's Writings on the Jews

- Two essays and two supplements on the Jews.
- First essay (1522): seeks to protect the rights of the Jews.
- Second essay (1543) and supplements: condemnation of the Jews for their unbelief, and encouragement of people to persecute them.

*Jesus Was
Born a Jew
(1523)*

Background

- Luther was accused of being a heretic and a Judaizer (seeking to make Christianity more Jewish) by preaching that Joseph was Jesus' natural and biological father (thus going against Catholic teaching about the virginal birth of Jesus).
- Luther was thus encouraged to defend himself against such accusations.

Jesus Was Born a Jew (1523)

Contents

- Jesus was a Jew who was born of Abraham and the virgin Mary.
- Emphasis on the fulfilment of OT prophecies.
- Praise of German Jews: due to the corrupt nature of the Church (Catholic), the Jews – claimed Luther – could not be blamed for refusing baptism.

Jesus Was Born a Jew (1523): Contents

Appeal for greater tolerance towards the Jews,
in the hope that they may turn to Christ.

It is necessary for us to welcome them into our
midst and to allow them to compete with us, by
giving them work and a home in society, so that
they may enjoy being in our company, hear our
teaching, and experience the Christian way of living.
If some of them continue to be stubborn, what of
it? After all, not all of us can claim to be good
Christians.

Jesus Was Born a Jew (1523): Effect

- Luther's work was welcomed by the Jews.
- Some even regarded him as the 'forerunner of the Messiah'.
- A Spanish translation was prepared for the baptized Jews of Spain.
- Regarded as a missionary document to be emulated.

Change in Luther's Attitude

- A sect in Moravia was adopting Jewish customs and practices (e.g., circumcision, Sabbath observance).
- Were Jews proselytizing among Protestants?
- Luther wrote an open letter to Wolfgang Schlik, *Against the Sabbatarians* (1538).

Change in Luther's Attitude

- Emphasis on the stubbornness and unbelief of the Jews.

Given that fifteen hundred years of unlimited wandering has not persuaded the Jews to know Christ, you can – with a clear conscience – give up all hope for them (Letter to Schlik).

- Why the delay before the Jews could return to their land? Is it not due to their sin of rejecting Christ?
- God has turned his back on his elect nation.

Change in Luther's Attitude

Frederick, the prince of Saxony, removes the right of Jews to dwell in his principality (1536).

Frederick was one of the main sponsors and benefactors of the Protestant Reformation.

A prominent Jew (Josel of Rosheim) called on Luther to intercede on their behalf.

Luther refused to help a nation that had refused to turn to Christ.

On the Jews and their Lies (1543)

Background

- Luther receives a copy of a Jewish tract (a dialogue between a Jew and a Christian) that attacked Christian teaching (the tract has not survived).
- Luther wrote the following texts:

On the Jews and their Lies
(January 1543)

*The Unknowable Name
and the Generations of
Christ* (March 1543)

The Last Words of David
(August 1543)

On the Jews and their Lies (1543)

Contents

- The Jews have no privileges since the coming of Christ.
- Repetition of accusations:
 - poisoning of wells
 - murder of Christian children

‘The devil and all his angels have possessed this nation.... There is the devil incarnate’.

Germany should follow the example of Spain and expel all Jews.



On the Jews and their Lies (1543) Contents

We are to blame for not seeking vengeance for the innocent blood of our Lord and of all the Christians poured out for three hundred years after the destruction of Jerusalem, and all the blood of the children that was poured out since then....

We are to blame for not killing them. Rather, we allow them to live without any obstacles in our midst despite all their murdering, cursing, blaspheming, lying and slandering. We protect and defend their synagogues, their homes, their lives and their property.

On the Jews and their Lies (1543)

Contents: Seven Proposals

1. Burn their synagogues and schools where they teach blasphemy.
2. Destroy their homes and cast them out to live like gypsies in sheds in order to remind them of their status as wanderers.
3. Confiscate the Talmud and the prayer books of the Jews.
4. Prevent every rabbi from teaching the faith.
5. The state should not protect them on the highways.
6. Prohibit the borrowing of money with interest, the Church to claim their property.
7. Enforce every Jew to work with their hands in order to earn their bread.

On the Jews and their Lies (1543): Effect

- Many of Luther's fellow Protestants were astounded at his extreme and scathing words about the Jews.
- The Christians of Germany were reluctant to support Luther because they were financially dependent on the Jews.
- The Church of Rome accuses Luther of 'writing in blood' and of inciting violence against the Jews.
- Henry Bullinger: the words of a pig's shepherd'.

On the Jews and their Lies (1543)

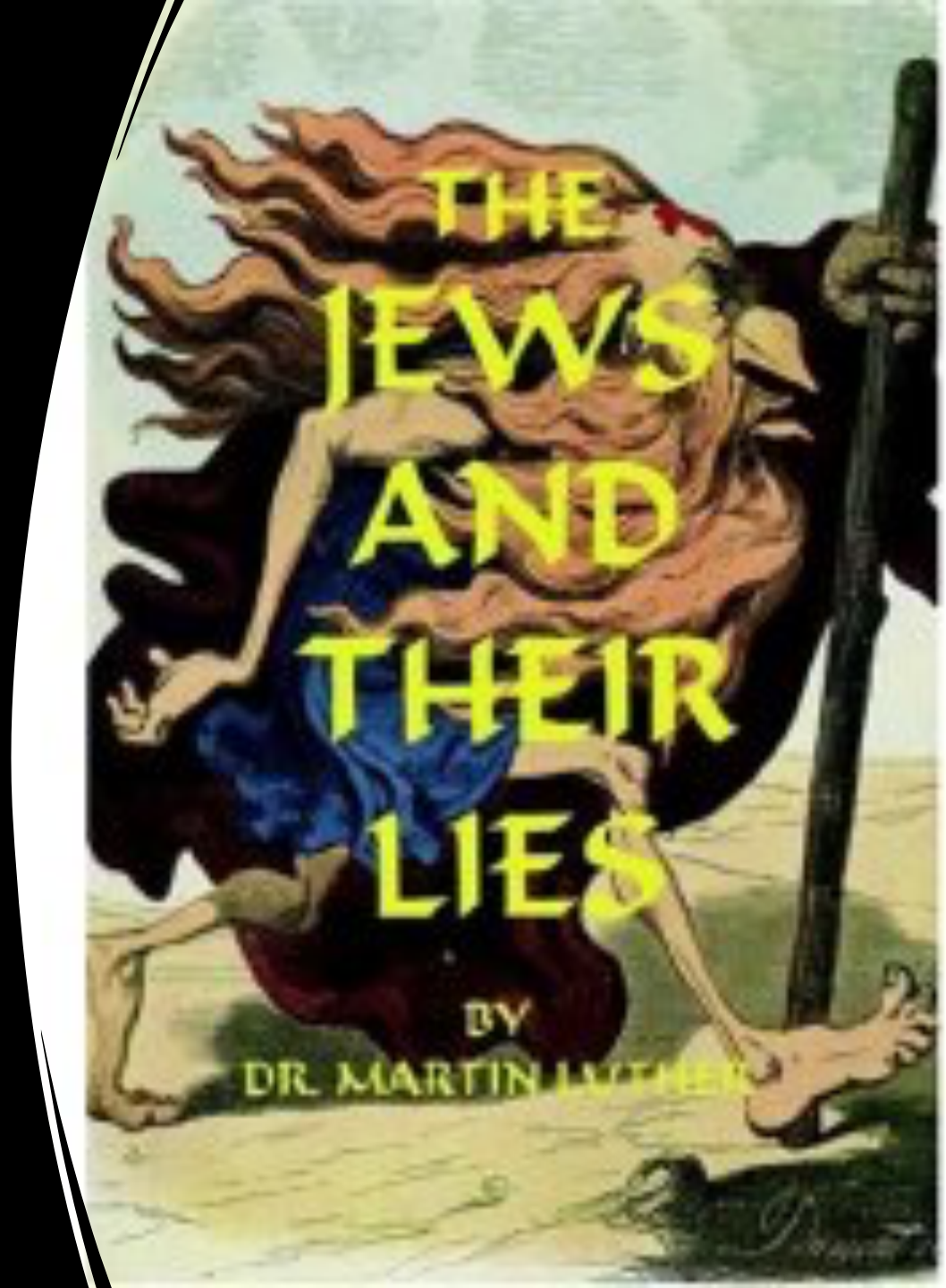
Effect

Luther gave his last sermon (15 February 1546, three days before his death) in Eisleben, the town of his birth.

I observe that the Jews are still in your midst. Now, we must deal with them in a Christian way and seek to lead them to the Christian Faith.... We must invite them to turn to the Messiah and to receive baptism from him.... If they refuse, we must prohibit them from remaining in our midst because they disrespect and blaspheme Christ. If they cease with their blasphemy, we must forgive them in good will; however, if they refuse, we must banish them from our midst....

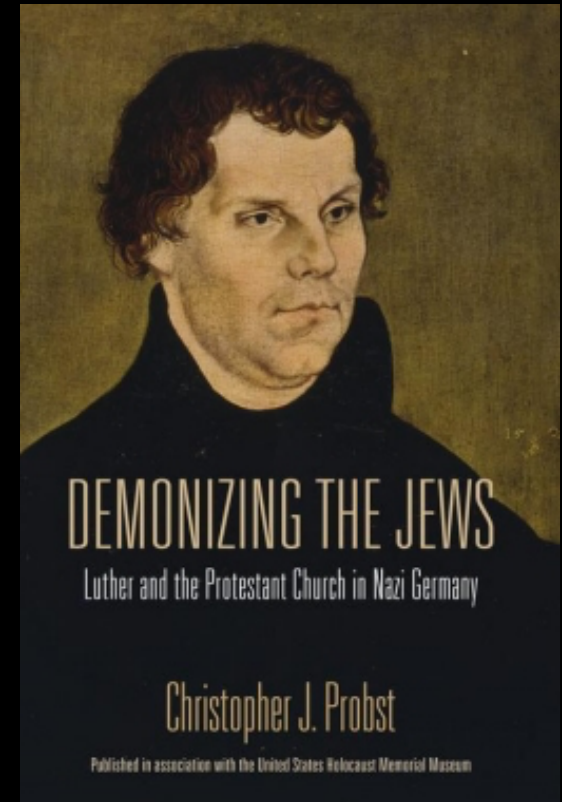
Luther's writings had minimal influence between 1600 and 1900.

Effect



How does one account for the change in Martin Luther's attitude towards the Jews?

- Disappointment upon realizing that they were not going to accept baptism (the impetus for his tract in 1523). They were not 'the Christians of the future' after all.
- Illness: physical (and mental?) ill health during his last years.
- Theology: the Old Testament was a prophecy for the coming of Christ and the emphasis should be placed on its spiritual significance (different from the Jewish rabbis). Rejection of Jewish attitudes towards grace based on works (rather than faith).
- The last days and the three servants of the Antichrist: the Pope, the Muslim, the Jew.
- A change of tactic rather than a change of attitude?



Luther's Legacy?

Daniel Botkin,
'Luther Baptising
Jews'

If a Jew came to
him for baptism, he
would tie a
millstone around his
neck and throw him
into the river in the
name of Abraham,
Isaac and Jacob



Luther's Legacy?



Luther and the Nazis

- Kristallnacht (1938): a pamphlet that outlined Luther's recommendations on how to deal with the Jews.
- Julius Streicher, in Nürnberg 1946: 'Martin Luther should be standing with me in the dock'.
- Hitler used Luther's final writings while composing *Mein Kampf* (a claim made by P.E. Wiener, *Martin Luther: Hitler's Spiritual Ancestor*).
- Many believe, however, that there is a fundamental difference between the anti-Jewish writings of Luther and the racist, anti-Semitic policies of Hitler.

John
Calvin



1509-1566
John Calvin

Calvin and the Jews

- France (1509-1535) – no Jews in the country since 1394.
- No Jews in Geneva (1536-) for half a century.
- Calvin discussed Judaism and the Jews with theologians from Germany during his visits to Strasbourg, Worms and Frankfurt.

Calvin's Attitude: The Influence of the Scriptures

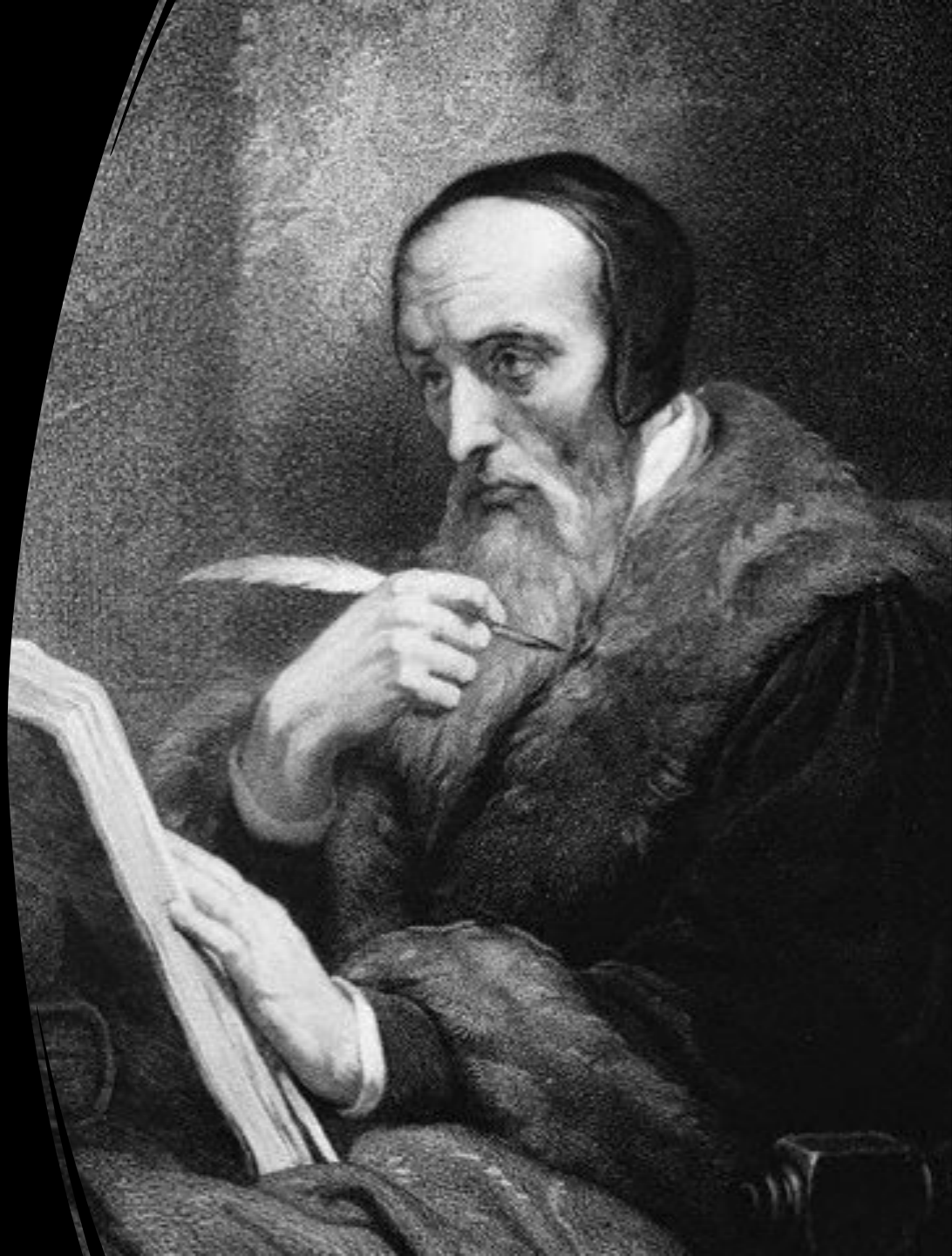
- Emphasis on the language and grammar of the biblical texts.
- Emphasis on the historical aspects of the Bible: the aims of the original authors.
- The influence of rabbinic commentators such as Rashi and Ibn Ezra.
- Rather than interpreting the texts from an allegorical and spiritual perspective (and viewing the OT as a prediction and preparation for the NT), Calvin emphasized the historical aspects (e.g., it is not necessary to find references to Christ in the OT).
- The 'firstborn son' is Judaism.

God's Eternal Covenant with the Jews

The New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-33)

God does not say: 'I give them a different law'; but rather, 'I write my law on their hearts – the same law that was once given to their fathers.'

God does not therefore offer something that is new in terms of substance; the difference can be found only in the form (Calvin, Commentary on Jeremiah).



*Answer to the Questions and
Objections of a Jew*

It is possible that the essay is based on Calvin's meeting with the Jew Josel of Rosheim (Frankfurt 1539).

What are the differences between Christians and Jews? The coming of the Messiah, the divinity of Christ, the Jewish law, the Jews and the crucifixion.

The essay has a conciliatory tone; he quotes frequently from the OT rather than the NT.

