

Luther and the Jews: A Blot in History?

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Since Luther's works were used by the Nazi regime to form the Reich Church and to defend their actions before the larger Christian community, Luther's writings on the Jews have been demonised and shunned. Throughout Luther's career he wrote numerous works on the Jews including negative and positive views. While some of what Luther said goes too far, his negative views on the Jews are not the same as the anti-Semitic views of the Nazi's and he would never have supported anything as devastating as the Holocaust.

Throughout Luther's career he wrote a vast amount of writings on Jews including letters, lectures, sermons and even commentaries, containing a mixture of positive and negative comments on the Jews. Due to word limits this essay will focus on the most noteworthy of these writings, his five treatises concerning the Jewish people, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* (1523), *Against the Sabbatarians: Letter to a Good Friend* (1538), *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543), *On the Ineffable Name and on the Lineage of Christ* (1543) and *On the Last Words of David* (1543). While *On the Jews and Their Lies* has been demonised due to its hardline approach towards the Jews and use in the Nazi regime to create the Protestant Reich Church, each treatise contains a deeply theological and biblical discussion surrounding the Jews. While they are in some way similar they are each separate works and it is best if they are viewed in this way.

Because of Hitler's use of Luther's works many anti-Christian or anti-Lutheran thinkers have deemed Luther as an 'anti-Semite' (Oberman p94) or 'Nazi'. Disappointingly it is a fact that Hitler and the Nazi's used Luther's works, mainly *On the Jews and Their Lies*, to justify themselves before the German Lutherans who represented more than 50% of the German population, it was never Luther's intent for a genocide of the Jewish people. In Luther's early years he not only supported the Jews but he criticized the papacy for their harsh treatment of the Jews. The young Luther had a high respect for the Jews as God's chosen race and had extremely optimistic, if somewhat naive, plans of converting them to Christianity. His 'hatred' for the Jews grew out of failed attempts of conversion and fearful suspicions fuelled by popular anti-Jewish propaganda and a combination of true and false accusations. While it may not justify the cruel things Luther's wrote he was not the first or cruellest person to write against the Jews, numerous people before and after Luther wrote disapprovingly on the Jews, including the early Church Fathers such as Clement, Justin Martyr, St Ambrose, St Gregory etc. John Chrysostom wrote eight Homilies or sermons entitled *Against the Jews* where he writes in support for the slaughter of Jews:

"Although such beasts are unfit for work, they are fit for killing. And this is what happened to the Jews: while they were making themselves unfit for work, they grew fit for slaughter."
(John Chrysostom *Against the Jews* Homily 1.II.6)

Luther did not always write negatively on the Jews, in 1523 he wrote his first and most positive treatise concerning the Jews entitled *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*. Luther wrote this after Archduke Ferdinand had accused him of preaching a false doctrine in which Joseph was Jesus' biological father and that through him Jesus was born of Abraham's seed. (LW 45 p197) Luther defends himself against this wrongful accusation and after defending the Virgin Birth and Jesus' Jewishness, he takes the opportunity to convince the Jews of Jesus' messiahship:

"we would also like to do a service to the Jews on the chance that we might bring some of them back to their own true faith." (p213)

Luther finishes this treatise with a strong defence of the Jews in which he slanders the papal law and those who try to force conversion upon the Jews and says that the Jews have been forced into usury because Christians refuse to trade with them or let them do honest labour. Luther says the best way to

convert them is to work alongside them, show them Christian love and allow them to witness the Christian life. In the conclusion on page 229 Luther has an interesting thought that Christians are not morally superior to the Jews, and while he rightly acknowledge their erroneous beliefs that Jesus isn't the Messiah he doesn't condone forced conversion, instead he says that "*if some of them [i.e. the Jews] should prove stiff-necked [and therefore not convert and accept Jesus as the Christ], what of it? After all, we ourselves are not all good Christians either.*" (p229 brackets are mine) this statement closes the argument declaring that since we Christians stumble in our faith, that if the Jews find Christ to be a "stumbling block" (ref. 1 Cor. 1:23) then let them live in peace.

In 1538 Luther's anger against the Jews began to form as seen in his second treatise on the Jews entitled *Against the Sabbatarians: Letter to a Good Friend*. This work is best viewed, not separately but simply as a gateway into the later 1543 work *On the Jews and Their Lies*, since much of the arguments contained in the former is reused in the latter. The most useful line in this entire work is found in the opening lines of the debate. "*In the first place, the Jewish people have become very stubborn because of their rabbis. As a result they are difficult to win over.*" (LW 47 p65) The importance of these two lines is threefold. Firstly it states his anger at the stubbornness of the Jews despite the "*what of it?*" on his earlier treatise (see above). Secondly Luther reveals that his growing hatred of the Jews is rooted in the fact that they are "*difficult to win over*" and thus his dreams of conversion are failing. Thirdly Luther declares that his anger is not directly targeted at all Jews but at the stubborn and lying rabbis, an issue that he later refers to in *On the Jews and Their Lies* where he reiterates a conflict he had with three Jews in Wittenberg who had tried to convert him to Judaism. He records that when he was victorious against them in a debate they fled saying that they were obligated to believe the teachings of their rabbis (LW 47 p192). It was incidents like this which contributed to Luther's developing hatred for the Jews. These two treatises cover the numerous reasons why Luther's view of the Jews began to shift from positive to negative, in addition to the fact that the Jews were too stubborn to convert to Christianity, the Jewish people were also attempting to convert Christians to Judaism which resulted in the development of the Sabbatarian movement. Little is known of the Sabbatarians except that they were largely influence by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament and therefore believed in an observance of the Jewish Sabbath. Luther criticizes them in his *Lectures on Genesis* mocking them and sarcastically and rhetorically asked if they will insist on circumcision (LW 2 p361) and the rest of the Mosaic Law. Luther blames the Jews for this movements referring to the Sabbatarians as 'the apes of the Jews.'

Further contributing factors to Luther's anti-Jewish treatises was the surrounding society and fellow Christian theologians. Luther's writings were greatly curbed by earlier and fellow Christian writers who shared in his anti-Jewish views. The most influent of all these writers was Anthony Margaritha who Luther not only quotes but promotes:

"For further information on their devilish practises with such numbers and words, you may read Anthony Margaritha." (LW 47 p257)

Margaritha was a Jewish convert to Christianity whose work *The Whole Jewish Faith*, published more than a decade before Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies*, greatly influenced Luther. Having been raised a Jew, Margaritha knew of all the Jewish "wickedness" and his work contained accusations that Jews committed blasphemy against Jesus and Mary, were guilty of usury and theft, and that they wished to violently overthrow Christian authorities. As Schramm writes, while numerous false accusations were circulating during this era there had been strong anti-Christian themes running through the Jewish literature since the twelfth century, attacking the beliefs of Christian and praying for their destruction (Schramm p7).

This "anti-Christian" ideology is best exemplified in the 13th century Jewish text *The Book of Victory*. Even though some of Margaritha's claims were probably true, 16th century Germany was full of false claims and anti-Jewish propaganda including rumours that the Jews poisoned wells, kidnapped children and drained their blood for religious rituals, practised witchcraft and idolatry, and murdered Christians to earn religious merit (p217,242 & 261). And it is here where Luther makes a grave

mistake. He had been a true eyewitness to the Jews' stubbornness, lies and anti-Christian slander but Luther only assumes the claims of murdered and sorcery are true, "*whether it is true or not, I do know that they do not lack the complete, full and ready will to do such things either secretly or openly.*" (p217) Therefore, Luther made the grave mistake of accusing the Jews of false crimes.

"Although Luther did not invent anti-Jewishness, he promoted it to a level never before seen in Europe." (Walker, www.nobeliefs.com/luther)

Luther was neither the first nor the last Christian theologian to speak harshly of the Jews but in his *On the Jews and Their Lies* (and his *Table Talks*) he goes above and beyond what was reasonable. This treatise which we have briefly skimmed over above is best viewed when broken into four separate parts. In the first part Luther deals with the false teachings and boasts of Jewish theology where he condemns the Jews' ideology that they are racially superior and religiously more pious because they have the Mosaic Law, circumcision and lineage of the Patriarchs. Here Luther is justified in condemning such false doctrines. In the second and longest section Luther dives into a theological debate arguing against the Jewish exegesis of the Old Testament and instead he exalts the Christological interpretations of the Old Testament. The third section is where Luther takes a strict tone to condemn the Jews on their blasphemies against Jesus and the Virgin Mary, here too Luther is justified, he doesn't go unnecessarily harsh against the Jews and he rightly took up the charge to refute such anti-Christian hatred. "*Section four is the most notorious,*" (Bjoraker p13) in this section Luther takes his hardline approach against the Jews calling for both secular and ecclesiastical authorities to take action against the Jews. In this section Luther replaces his friendly, soft touch approach at conversion from his first treatise and instead calls for a violent and forceful approach for conversion against the Jews. This is both unreasonable and unnecessary. It is this section that many anti-Semitic (i.e. Nazi or Neo-Nazi) groups have used in defence of their actions and it is this section that has given Luther such a bad reputation when concerning the Jews. Luther's main goal here is to follow the example of Spain, France and England and expel the Jews from his country and send them back to their fatherland (Israel), Luther's suggestion for forced conversion is only a secondary solution.

Luther states in this fourth section that since "*we cannot extinguish the unquenchable fire of divine wrath, of which the prophets speak nor can we convert the Jews... we must practice a sharp mercy to see whether we might save at least a few from the glowing flames.*" (LW 47 p268) Many critics of Luther associates this section of the treatise with the Jewish Holocaust and it is impossible to discuss this section "*without noting how similar to his proposals were the actions of the National Socialist regime...however, the Nazis surpassed even Luther's severity.*" (LW 47, editor's footnote p268) In this section of Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies* Luther calls for both the civil authorities and the church authorities to take action against the Jews to snuff out the flames of their lies and blasphemous doctrines. Luther goes far beyond the limits of a reasonable and justifiable argument, he calls for the burning of Synagogues and Jewish homes, the confiscation and burning of their Talmud, Prayer books and to the worst extent their Hebrew Bibles, he calls for the political leaders to abolish safe conduct of the Jews and to prohibit the Jews from usury and to enforce manual labour. This last one is done in an attempt to rid Germany of the corruption of usury and bribery of civil authorities. Luther also calls for the suppression of Jewish belief systems, along with the destruction of their places of worship. He also orders that the Rabbis be forbidden to teach and that no Jew is even allowed to utter the name of God in public.

It is important to note that Luther does not call for the annihilation or genocide of the Jews for he still longs to "*save at least a few from the glowing flames,*" and forcibly convert the Jews to Christianity. Luther later reaffirms this dream of conversion after he calls for a prohibition on usury and says that if "*a Jew is sincerely converted,*" (p 270) he should be given some financial support. All these calls for action while harsh and violent are done in the name conversion. The error here is that conversion not only shouldn't but can't be enforced. A person should believe by faith and not fear. Forceful conversion only causes an outward conversion and God looks at the inward beliefs of his children. If a

Jews (or anybody else) was to outwardly proclaim Christ Crucified but inwardly reject him he is no better off than a Jew who publically declares Jesus to be the heretical son of a whore.

Later in 1543 Luther wrote a further two treatises regarding the Jews, *On the Ineffable Name and on the Lineage of Christ* and *On the Last Words of David*. The first was written regarding the medieval Jewish practice of Kabbalistic sorcery. Kabbalistic sorcery was a form of witchcraft believed to have been developed by the Jews during the Babylonian Exile in which the Jews believed that they could perform miracles by correctly pronouncing the Ineffable Name of God or in Hebrew, Shem Ha-Meforash, aka YHWH. Luther first became aware of this through his favourite anti-Jewish Hebraist, Margaritha. Luther charges into this issue using Porchetus' (a 13th century anti-Jewish theologian) summary of the *Toledot Yeshu*.

The *Toledot Yeshu* is a medieval anti-gospel written prior to the 9th century by anti-Christian Jews and translated into Latin in the 13th by a Dominican monk. This writing claims Jesus was an illegitimate child of a whore who seduced women, died a shameful heretic and that both Jesus and his disciples practised sorcery using the Ineffable Name. Part one of Luther's treatise is targeted at the Kabbalistic use of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) and a criticism of the civil authorities for their toleration of the Jews. Between the writing of *On the Jews and their Lies* where Luther calls for a violent forced conversion and the writing of *On the Ineffable Name and on the Lineage of Christ* Luther has given up all hope of converting the Jews and he states in the latter that his intentions were not "to write against the Jews, as if I hoped to convert them... [but to]warn our Christians about them... and also to strengthen and honour our faith." (Schramm's and Stjerna's trans. of WA 53:p579, p179, brackets mine). Luther goes on to state that converting the Jews is as impossible as converting Satan and that "a Jewish heart is as hard as a stick, a stone, as iron, as a devil."

The second part of this treatise is less crucial towards the Jews and focuses on the Davidic lineage of the Virgin Mary based upon the conflicting genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke (Joseph the Carpenter being descended from the Matthean line and the Virgin Mary from the Lucan line).

While Luther is justified in arguing against and badmouthing the anti-Christian *Toledot Yeshu*, he (in typical Luther fashion) goes beyond reason and calls all Jewish interpretations of the Bible 'Jewish piss, shit and sweat' and that their rabbinical exegesis is 'Judas' piss'. Luther even goes yet another step further and takes the term 'children of the devil', a common term for non-Christians derived from the Johannine literature (John 8:44, 1 John 3:10) and adds to it calling the Jews Satan worshippers and claiming the devil is their god.

For Luther's fifth and final treatise on the Jews he backs down and takes it easy on the Jews. Luther writes this treatise to warn his fellow Christians on using Jewish commentaries on the Old Testament because they reject Jesus and lie "against the true Jews and Israel, that is, against the apostles and prophet." (LW 15 p344) He says to reject all Jewish commentaries because if they truly believed and interpreted Moses correctly than they would believe in Christ (John 5:46).

Luther, however, doesn't go any further than calling the Jews (along with the papacy and Muslims) liars and blasphemers. Therefore Luther writes his final treatise as a soft blow to the Jews forming a nice sandwich from his treatises, placing a chunk of unreasonable hatred between two slices of justifiable kindness and gentle correction.

"Freethinkers should become aware of the anti-Semitic influence that Luther has brought on the world. His vehement attack on Jews and his powerful influence on the German faithful has brought a new hypothesis to mind: that the Jewish holocaust, and indeed, the eliminationist form of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany may not have occurred without the influence from Luther's book "On the Jews and Their Lies." (Walker <http://www.nobeliefs.com/luther.htm>)

Sadly this has become the default position of many anti-Luther or pro-Jewish activists. They blame the entire holocaust on the writings on Luther and the Lutherans. Even modern day Neo-Nazis use this view to claim that anti-Semitism is both true and Christian.

The Mahnung on St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg is a post-Holocaust plaque placed underneath the offensive anti-Jewish carving that Luther refers to in his *On the Ineffable Name and on the Lineage of Christ*. The Mahnung claims that six million Jews were killed under the sign of a cross, which many modern scholars refer to as the Twisted Cross. Both of the statements by Walker and the Mahnung are wrong, Luther's works did not cause the Holocaust and the six million Jews were killed under the sign of the Swastika not the Cross.

Firstly, in defence of the church, although the Nazis who founded the German Reich Church believed in the anti-Jewish Nazi regime it was the Nazi Party and not the Reich Church that enacted the killing of the Jews. And in Luther's defence it is both foolish and pro-Nazi to blame the Holocaust on his writings for if this is done then the blame of the Holocaust is removed from Hitler and his anti-Jewish regimes.

The reason why Luther cannot and should not be blamed for the Holocaust is twofold. Firstly there are differences of opinion in his writings and Hitler's perfect race theology. As Bjoraker wrote in his paper, Luther is not an anti-Semite in the modern racist sense of the word. Hitler although born Catholic did not remain a Christian and his anti-Semitic views were based on revenge and evolution. The Nazi Party sort revenge on the Jews for their funding of the Allies during WW1 and Hitler's evolutionary views on the perfect Aryan Race were key factors in his hatred of the Jews. So while Hitler based hatred on biology and targeted the nationality group known as the Jews, Luther focused simply on the religious organisation of Jews and their rejection of Christ, "*his basic problem remains religion not race.*" (Stjerna p34) The best explanation for this concept is that Hitler was anti-Semitic (racist) while Luther was anti-Judaic (against Judaism not the Jewish race).

Although one question still remains and this falls into the second part of the twofold defence of Luther. If Hitler's views were biological and Luther's were religious why did Hitler use Luther's writings? The answer is simply, for national support. In 1939 after six years of Nazi leadership, 54% of the German population was Protestant (plus 40% Catholic). With Protestants (and Christians in general) being such a high majority in Germany Hitler needed them to support the Nazi Party and all their actions, including the persecution of the Jews. It was for this reason that any anti-Jewish comment written by Luther was collected and used by the Nazis to justify their actions before the Church.

The next question is, why did they use Luther and not the writings of other anti-Jewish theologians. The simple answer is as Davnet states, Luther was a national hero in Germany. Luther was Hitler's perfect candidate for a religious scapegoat, he wrote against the Jews, he was a supporter of nationalism and he was well known and respected by the German population. However, Luther never condoned genocide of the Jews and his writings were greatly misused by Hitler. If Luther had been alive during the Nazi regime he would have written several treatises condemning Hitler and the Nazi Party, just as his *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* condemned the papacy for their unfair treatment of the Jews.

Throughout Luther's career he wrote vastly on the Jews, both positively and negatively. While many of his negative comments seem violent and overly harsh this is not racial targeting of a single group but the typical behaviour of Luther to condemn and rant against anyone who rejected Christ. While some of what Luther wrote on the Jews is both theologically wrong and unreasonably justified much of what he wrote is true and called for. Luther's views against the Jews were always one of religious correction and he never expected either the Nazis or the Holocaust. Luther's writings on the Jews are not a blot in history but their misuse by Nazis is both a blot in history and on Luther's good name.

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