

## INTRODUCTION

Reflections on the life of Luther and the impact of the Reformation have for the most part been focused on the themes of faith and justification, scripture and tradition, and God and man. These, from the Protestant perspective, are positive contributions along with the dramatic narratives of Luther's life, tend to crowd out other negative aspects that also impacted Christianity to this day. This paper attempts to highlight how Protestantism continues to struggle with the effects of Luther's problematic statements regarding the Jews.

## LUTHER'S VIEWS ON JEWS

In order to do justice to any movement or individual, both strengths and weaknesses need to be fairly assessed.<sup>1</sup> Luther at times has been made a hero for

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<sup>1</sup> In light of the specific setting of the Holocaust "it is neither possible nor desirable to be neutral, since the horrific results speak for themselves." Anders Gedmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann*. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 3. As such "fairly" needs to be understood not in the sense of "objective," but instead in the sense of giving a fair hearing to the reasoning, the historical setting, and development background of individuals and movement.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic and for the sake of transparency my personal journey on this topic should be noted at the outset. My earlier research had focused on the complexity and nuance of Jewish rituals and I noticed how early 20<sup>th</sup> century literature presented Jewish rituals as simplistic and primitive. I assumed anti-Semitic and *religionsgeschichtliche* currents that might have caused this. I also assumed Luther's sayings against Jews reflected the anti-Semitism visible in history subsequent to Luther. In my research for this paper I have become more moderate towards Luther (seeing him

emphasizing the five *solas*, and equally made a villain for bringing discord into the unity of the church. Similarly, Luther has been made a hero by some for his statements about the Jews, and considered a villain by still yet others. Before examining Luther's impact in this area, a brief reflection about Luther's writings on this subject is pertinent.

### **Luther's Writings**

Luther's writings regarding the Jews are primarily found in two documents: *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* (1523) and *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543), though there are other documents.<sup>2</sup>

#### *That Jesus Was Born a Jew*

In this first work Luther argues that since Jesus was a Jew the Jews "are blood relatives, cousins, and brothers of our Lord"<sup>3</sup> and closer to the apostles and Jesus since they are "nearer to Christ than we are" and "we are but Gentiles...aliens and in-laws."<sup>4</sup> The purpose for his tract is that Jews be reached for the gospel: "I will cite from Scripture the reasons that move me to believe that Christ was a Jew born of a virgin, that I might

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focused on religion rather than race) but more appalled by early 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians for their clear and fervent anti-Semitism. As a result my earlier assumption of a direct progression, if development, from Luther to the National Socialists needs revision. While Luther's statements cannot be excused, the National Socialists instrumentalized Luther for their purposes: The Nazi Christians "reinterpreted Luther against his own intentions, his own statements, and the evidence of his deeds." Heiko Oberman, *The Impact of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 75.

<sup>2</sup> References to Jews are found in other works as well, such as *Against the Sabbatarians* (1538), *Vom Schem Hamphoras* (1543) and various sermons.

<sup>3</sup> LW 45:201.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

perhaps also win some Jews to the Christian faith.”<sup>5</sup> The rest of the document is a carefully argued case for the virgin birth based on the Hebrew terms *betulah* (maiden) and *almah* (virgin) of Isaiah 7:14. In this whole document, Luther is sympathetic to the Jews: “I hope that if one deals in a kindly way with the Jews and instructs them carefully from Holy Scripture, many of them will become genuine Christians.”<sup>6</sup> He also recognizes that Christians have not treated Jews fairly and “if the apostles, who also were Jews, had dealt with us Gentiles as we Gentiles deal with the Jews, there would never have been a Christian among the Gentiles.”<sup>7</sup> In response to the “brotherly fashion” of the apostles “we in our turn ought to treat the Jews in a brotherly manner in order that we might convert some of them.”<sup>8</sup> Luther did not limit himself to mere talk but interceded for Jews such as legal safe guards.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> LW 45:200. Specifically, Luther even argues that he would rather be a Jew than a papist. “If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian. They have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs rather than human beings; they have done little else than deride them and seize their property.” Ibid. He notes the same sentiment in other passages: “If I were a Jew, the pope should never persuade me to his doctrine; I would rather be ten times racked. Popedom, with its abominations and profanities, has given to the Jews infinite offence. I am persuaded if the Jews heard our preaching, and how we handle the Old Testament, many of them might be won, but, through disputing, they have become more and more stiff-necked, haughty, and presumptuous.” Martin Luther, *Select Works of Martin Luther*, paragraph 3229.

<sup>6</sup> LW 45:200.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> LW 45:200-201.

<sup>9</sup> “Two Jewish rabbis, named Schamaria and Jacob, came to me at Wittenberg, desiring of me letters of safe conduct, which I granted them, and they were well pleased.” Martin Luther, *Select Works of Martin Luther*, paragraph 3248.

*On the Jews and Their Lies*

After such positive sentiments Luther's about-face in later documents is even more surprising. The latter work, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, ends in a sevenfold attack against Jews. At the outset Luther explains why he is once again addressing the Jews: Though "I had decided not to write anymore, neither of the Jew or against the Jew,"<sup>10</sup> Luther heard they the Jews "do not cease trying to win over to themselves, us."<sup>11</sup> Without wanting to "quarrel with the Jews"<sup>12</sup> nor "convert the Jew. For that is impossible" he wants to address some of the arguments against Christianity he has encountered by the Jews.<sup>13</sup> He critiques the prayers of Jews that focus on blood lineage rather than faith and their "self-praise" as children of Abraham through circumcision.<sup>14</sup> He considers them cursed because they have "outward obedience to the Laws of Moses without true obedience to God's Ten Commandments."<sup>15</sup> Luther then contends that since Jews reject

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, *Against the Jews and their Lies* (Los Angeles: Christian Crusade Publishers, 1948), 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> See also "Therefore, a Christian should be satisfied and not quarrel with the Jews." *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> "In order to strengthen our faith, we shall consider a few instances of foolishness in their faith and interpretation of Scripture, because they slander our faith in such a mean way." *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 14. "They are boastful, proud fools, who to this day can not do more than to praise themselves because of their nobility and blood; praise themselves alone and despise and condemn the whole world in their schools, prayers, and teachings; yet they imagine themselves to be standing before God as His dearest children." *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 and 21.

the virgin birth and claim Mary to be a whore, they themselves are actually are acting as children of whoredom based on Hosea 2:4.5. Thus they make a fool of God.

Subsequently, Luther turns the argument of the Jews against them. He then tries to demonstrate that God has forsaken them since they have lost Canaan, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple for 1,400 years. They received *Unheil* or calamity. Yet, instead of heeding God's word and accepting Jesus, "they constantly remain stiff-necked, blinded, hardened, and immovable. [They] still hope that God will bring them home again and give everything back to them."<sup>16</sup> They thus have become a "bitter, more poisonous, more vehement enemy"<sup>17</sup> against Christians, only surpassed by the Devil himself, despite the generosity, care, and protection of Christians.<sup>18</sup>

Luther then refers to the Talmud in which "it is no sin to kill if a Jew kills a heathen, but it is a sin if he kills a brother in Israel! It is no sin if he does not keep his oath to a heathen. Therefore to steal and rob (as they do with their usury) from a heathen is divine service." This double standard is based on the Jewish differentiation between "noble blood" of the Jews and the "cursed Goyim."<sup>19</sup> In the conclusion Luther, after discussing additional scripture allegations and history, returns this sentiment in kind by listing seven resolutions:

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>18</sup> "They have no reason, since we only do good to them. They live among us in our homes, under our protection..." Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 31.

First, to set fire to their synagogues and schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and Christendom....  
Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed....  
Third, I advise that all of their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them.  
Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach....  
Fifth, I advise that safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews. For they have no business in the countryside, since they are not lords, officials, tradesmen, or the like. Let them stay at home....  
Sixth, I advise that usury be prohibited to them, and that all treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping....<sup>20</sup>  
Seventh, I recommend putting a flail, an ax, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the hands of young, strong Jews and Jewesses and letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow, as was imposed on the children of Adam.<sup>21</sup>

### *Vom Shem Hamphoras*

In *Vom Schem Hamphoras* Luther makes a particularly striking reference to Jews. He reminds his readers of a statue that had long ago been built into the structure of the Wittenburg church. The sculpture depicts a sow feeding her offspring along with several human figures representing Jews. Beyond the heinous image of humans sucking a swine, the pig is chosen specifically as an unclean animal to further insult the Jew.

### Understanding Luther

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<sup>20</sup> Luther goes on to say that money should be set aside and given to a Jew who sincerely converts and becomes a Christian: “Whenever a Jew is sincerely converted, he should be handed one hundred, two hundred, or three hundred florins, as personal circumstances may suggest. With this he could set himself up in some occupation for the support of his poor wife and children, and the maintenance of the old or feeble.” Martin Luther, *On the Jews and Their Lies* (Eugenspiegel Press, 2014): 98.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-99. Luther’s last recommendation lifts the restriction that forbade Jews from working in industry and can be viewed as the most positive comment of the list.

In his writings Luther presents both positive views of Jews and condemns them with harsh rhetoric. To understand Luther, several questions need to be explored:<sup>22</sup> First, was Luther anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish? Second, should Luther's views on Jews be evaluated as a whole or should they be viewed in contrast between the young Luther and the older Luther? Third, to what extent should other people groups that Luther addressed, be included in this discussion (Sabbatarians, Catholics, peasants, Turks, other "radical reformers")?

### **Anti-Semitic or Anti-Jewish**

First, was Luther anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish? In an interview in March 2017 Joseph Schuster, president of the Central Committee for Jews in Germany, expressed unequivocally: "Yes,...Luther was an anti-Semite."<sup>23</sup> Jerome Chanes would agree with this view distinguishing between six eras of anti-Semitism since the beginning of the common era: Ethical anti-Semitism in the pre-Christian Greco-Roman era; religious anti-Semitism in the Christian churches from antiquity to the Middle Ages; traditional Muslim

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<sup>22</sup> The process of understanding is not interested in justifying or harmonizing the writings of Luther, but rather to place them in their historical and cultural setting first, before examining their impact.

<sup>23</sup> "Ja. Was Sie von 1543 zitiert haben, lässt keinen Zweifel: Luther war ein Antisemit." Josef Schuster, "Für Juden ist Martin Luther eine problematische Persönlichkeit," n.p. [cited 11 November 2017]. Online: <http://www.zentralratdjuden.de/de/article/6124.f%C3%BCr-juden-ist-martin-luther-eine-problematische-pers%C3%B6nlichkeit.html>.

anti-Semitism; political anti-Semitism in post-Enlightenment; racial anti-Semitism of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century; and contemporary, also called “New Anti-Semitism.”<sup>24</sup>

Others have opposed this description of Luther, since anti-Semitism generally implies a racially motivated hatred.<sup>25</sup> The concept of races is something foreign to Luther and only developed in the post-Enlightenment era.<sup>26</sup> Luther’s concern throughout his writings though is not racial. In his positive writings he anticipates the conversion of the Jews to Christianity, while he has given up hope of converting the Jews in the latter writings. Contrary to the German National Socialists later, Luther would have considered

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<sup>24</sup> Jerome A. Chanes, *Antisemitism: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2004), 5-6. For a threefold structure see

<sup>25</sup> “Anti-Semitism indicates a racist polemic, and sometimes action against Jews.” Gerdmar, *Roots*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> In the foreword to the four volume *Encyclopedia of Anti-Semitism* the editors demonstrate the vagueness of the term and caution the reader not to easily conflate various terminology for “*Judenhass*” (hatred towards Jews). They differentiate between at least three major eras: religious anti-Judaism before the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the racially motivate “modern anti-Semitism,” and current movements threatening Jews originating in the Islamic world. “Wie notwendig begrifflich geschärfte Definitionen im historischen und gesellschaftlichen Kontext sind, zeigen die alltäglichen Missverständnisse, wenn etwa der ‚Moderne Antisemitismus‘, der als Rassenideologie im 19. Jahrhundert in Ablösung des religiösen Antijudaismus entstanden ist und vom NS-Regime im Völkermord an den Juden Europas agiert wurde, mit aktuellen Erscheinungen der Judenfeindschaft wie dem Islamismus verwechselt wird.“ Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Handbuch des Antisemitismus: Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol 3 (Berlin: deGruyter, 2010), v. For a nuanced differentiation of “*Judenhass*” the encyclopedia lists the following terminology: “Antijudaismus, Antizionismus, Erlösungsantisemitismus, islamisierter Antisemitismus, Judeophobie, Radauantisemitismus und Literarischer Antisemitismus, Rassenantisemitismus, Sekundärer Antisemitismus, Linker Antisemitismus, Völkischer Antisemitismus, Überfremdungsantisemitismus oder Moderner Antisemitismus.“ Ibid.



a Jew that converts to Christianity as a full Christian and no longer a Jew.<sup>27</sup> Thus, in reference to Luther, a better terminology might be “anti-Jewish” emphasizing his religious concerns in contrast to later racial views.<sup>28</sup> This differentiation is not without danger either, as the term can sometimes have a sense of “degrees of enmity towards Jews, anti-Judaism the more harmless form, a way of being critical without being anti-Semitic.”<sup>29</sup> This paper will follow the convention of differentiating the theological and racial (anti-Jewish versus anti-Semitic) writings, but is not concerned with developing degrees.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “Luther was anti-Jewish in his repeated warnings... but Luther was not an anti-Semite or racist of any kind because... for him a baptized Jew is fully Christian.” Heiko Oberman, *The Impact of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 76.

<sup>28</sup> Heiko Oberman, *The Roots of Antisemitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*, trans. James I. Porter (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 22. For one of the earliest distinctions between theological anti-Jewish and racial anti-Semitic writings see Wilhelm Maurer, “Luthers Stellung zur Judenfrage” in *Kirche und Synagoge Motive und Formen der Auseinandersetzung der Kirche mit dem Judentum im Laufe der Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1953). Gerdmar states: “In general usage, anti-Judaism indicates a polemic against Judaism as a religious system, whereas anti-Semitism indicates a racist polemic, and sometimes action against Jews.” Gerdmar, *Roots*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Gerdmar, *Roots*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> In this complexity of terminology, Christopher Probst offers a new terminology based on Gavin Langmuir’s work. He attempts to distinguish between “irrational” and “nonrational” thinking in which the former corresponds more closely to anti-Semitism and the later to anti-Judaism. This has not solved the dilemma though as the terminology itself introduces new complexities. For example, can theological arguments be considered “nonrational”? And how different are the terms themselves? Christopher Probst, *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana, 2012), 4.

## Young Luther versus Old Luther

The second question raises the question as to whether the young Luther can be separated from the older Luther. Traditionally, Luther's later works ("*Spätschriften*")<sup>31</sup> have been distinguished from his earlier works and treated as an unfortunate regression towards the anti-Judaism of Luther's time.<sup>32</sup> Heiko Oberman argues against this dominant view on the basis of three arguments: First, "Luther himself did not see his activities broken into periods (e.g., "young Luther"; "mature Luther"; "older Luther")."<sup>33</sup> Luther instead sees his life as one continuous message.

Second, Luther uses this same tone of language (eschatological and scatological rhetoric) throughout his life.<sup>34</sup> Oberman notes that the language Luther uses in his *On the Jews and Their Lies* is by no means limited to his old age. As early as 1515 Luther preaches a "solemn ceremonial sermon before the priors and select members of his order,

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<sup>31</sup> *Christen und Juden: Die Studien der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland 1975-2000*, vol. 1-3 (Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2002), 164. See also terminology such as: "The reception of the position of the later Luther towards the Jews" ("*Die Rezeption der Haltung des älteren Luther gegenüber den Juden*"). Ibid., 75.

<sup>32</sup> Some have even attempted to save Luther's honor by attributing his vitriol attacks to a physical condition of his later age. See Mark U. Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531- 46* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983). Heiko Oberman opposes this: "One should not apologize, by way of psychogrammatic history or periodizations of Luther's life, to explain away verbal vituperation as that of an old and unhappy man." Oberman, *Impact*, 51.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Probst points out that "close examination of Luther's thinking on 'the Jews' over the span of his lifetime might reveal that there is less distinction between the 'old Luther' and the 'young Luther' than his increasingly harsh tone might intimate." Probst, *Dehumanizing*, 54.

the Reformed Augustinians”<sup>35</sup> sermon exhorting Christians to take a stand against evil slander. Since the Satan himself is the originator of the sin of slander the call is extended to oppose the “God-awful, filthy adversary”, the Devil,<sup>36</sup> by using the Devil’s own tactics. Since hell “spews stench from the abyss of all filth”<sup>37</sup> Luther breaks into German to issue a scatological counterattack: “eat your own s\*\*\*!”<sup>38</sup> After the sermon Subsequently, Johann von Staupnitz appointed Luther his right hand and put him “in charge of eleven monastic houses” and the foundation *studia* of the order.<sup>39</sup> On this basis Oberman argues that Luther viewed himself as an eschatological “prophet at the end of time” and “his language was so chosen that Satan would hear him loud and clear.”<sup>40</sup>

Third, Luther’s contemporaries, despite their reputations, portray the same range of writings for and against the Jews. Oberman notes that the traditional view of Reuchlin “the hero of emancipation, Pfefferkorn the fanatic, Luther the bigoted anti-semite, and Erasmus the father of tolerance and human dignity” are simplistic generalizations. Each of the writers, though with different emphases, leaves a positive and anti-Jewish legacy.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>37</sup> WA 1.51.5-8.

<sup>38</sup> “Sehet wie hat sich der beschissen. Das fressestu!“ (See how he covered himself with s\*\*\*. Stuff it, eat it yourself). WA 1.51.24-25. Within the sermon Luther will repeat the sentiment by saying: “Get lost Satan, eat your own s\*\*\*!” Quoted from Oberman, *Impact*, 61.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>41</sup> “Reuchlin combines the plea for civil emancipation of the Jews with social discrimination and religious ostracism.” Ibid., 94. Erasmus “amalgam of peace, concord,

Apparently, Luther and his contemporaries were able to hold in tension contrasting sentiments towards Jews.

### **Catholics, Turks, Sabbatarians, peasants, and other opponents**

Finally, Luther needs to be viewed in context with other controversies. Luther's writings about the Jews are only one of several larger controversies that Luther was engaged in. Most of his attacks are directed towards the Catholic church and its representatives, especially the Pope. Luther is also quite engaged with the military threat of the Turks and the religious problems arising in Germany due to various radical reform movements by Anabaptists, Sabbatarians, and individuals such as Thomas Müntzer. Since they disagree with Luther's understanding of Jesus and the authority of scripture, Luther views them as "the coalition of God's enemies, which included among others 'papists', Jews, and Turks."<sup>42</sup> Luther then does not, contrary to National Socialism later, single out the Jews. In fact, "the Jews are actually judged more lenient than the 'papists.'"<sup>43</sup>

### Assessing Luther

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and erudition which constitutes the new tolerance as a typical Christian virtue is restricted to a Christian society, excluding Judaism as 'the most pernicious plague and bitterest enemy that one can find to the teaching of Christ.'" Ibid., 106.

<sup>42</sup> Probst, *Demonizing*, 57. Probst also comments that the polemic was "not only against Jews, but 'Turks' (Muslims) and Roman Catholics as well." Ibid., 54.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism* (Oxford: Oxford, 2017), 45.

Luther's contribution was at first positive and even in opposition to the major influences of his historical and cultural setting.<sup>44</sup> While his writings might not have been anti-Semitic, as defined above, this does not excuse his anti-Jewish statements, nor does this diminish their negative impact. As such Luther needs to be indicted for

1) not continuing to challenge the medieval church's and society's discriminatory stance towards Jews. Even though "Luther's anti-Semitism was very unoriginal,"<sup>45</sup> and the "appeal to blood purity...by Catholic theologians was far more innovative, far more 'racist' in principle, and arguably more aggressive and violent,"<sup>46</sup> nonetheless, he is a contributor in the continued abuses against Jews during his lifetime.

2) picking a fight he did not need to engage in. Luther views the Jews as a threat to Christ, the gospel, and scripture. This can best be understood in his view of Christendom: church and state tightly intertwined.<sup>47</sup> In the setting of *Cuius regio, eius religio* ("whose realm, his religion") the Jew posed a threat to the fabric of society. But

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<sup>44</sup> Certainly a good case can be made for humanist influences as well as scriptural convictions from Romans as Luther cites Paul's imagery of the grafted branches into the vine.

<sup>45</sup> Christopher Ocker adds "There is little in *Of the Jews and Their Lies* or in his other anti-Jewish writings that cannot be found in treatises and folklore current in the previous two hundred years, when violent incidents against Jews in Central Europe were generally more frequent and more widespread than in Luther's own lifetime." Christopher Ocker, "Martin Luther and Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, n.p. [cited 11 November 2017]. Online: <http://religion.oxfordre.com/>

<sup>46</sup> Ocker, "Martin Luther and Luther and Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism."

<sup>47</sup> See Mark Noll's discussion on Luther and Christendom. Mark Noll, *In the Beginning Was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life 1492-1783* (Oxford: Oxford, 2016), 30-49.

Luther widely overstates this threat, let alone argue for the Biblical validity of Christendom and *Cuius region, eius religio*.<sup>48</sup> At the time most Jews were very poor, as Luther readily admits, and their influence limited to small communities.

3) inciting violent language against the Jews. Of all people Luther was aware of the powerful effects his words had in speaking and even more so in print. The movement he had begun and the schism with the Catholic church were a direct result of challenges, rebuttals, offenses, and even apologies. Though Luther is aware of his offensive language, as he apologizes for his tone of voice before the Diet of Worms (1521), he nonetheless continues his vitriol language. Luther's scatological rhetoric is not mere references in passing to images, or idioms, but lengthy graphic descriptions of disturbing, repulsive, and unspeakable actions. And therefore Luther's conscious use of "vulgarity and violence' for effect" as a "typical [element] of his polemic"<sup>49</sup> cannot be soft-spoken, even if the historic setting is considered. This might have served a pragmatic purpose for his audience, but does not align with the moral codes of Scripture (Phil 4:8) nor the example and teachings of Christ (Matt 5-7).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> "The most important early leaders of the Protestant Reformation challenged neither Christendom nor Christianity's traditional deference to Scripture." Noll, *In the Beginning*, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Probst, *Demonizing*, 54.

<sup>50</sup> Luther's "in kind" style of reply as seen above in his reaction to the Jews and the devil are contrary to the model presented in the Sermon on the Mount, or Jesus' passion.

## LUTHER'S IMPACT

Luther's impact can be divided into two phases with opposite results: The Jewish Mission and National Socialism.

### **Jewish Mission**

The early writings of Luther and the example of the humanists set the tone for the 17<sup>th</sup> through early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Based on the biblical philology that the humanists like Erasmus raised along with an interest in Jewish ethnography, Christian Hebraism flourished. "After the Reformation scholars were more interested in ancient and contemporary Jews than ever before."<sup>51</sup> The Pietists Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705) and John Wilhelm Petersen (1649-1727) were forerunners in the movement to positively engage Jews. They based their assessment on Paul's statement that "all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:25-27) and found support for this in Luther's writings. Noting that the Protestant church had "suppressed [Luther's] crucial passage that favored Jewish missions" they published their own edition of Luther's Postills.<sup>52</sup> Nikolaus Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) continued the outreach to Jews both in missionary efforts but also in petitions and legal briefs on behalf of the Jews and their synagogue worship.<sup>53</sup> Contrary to Luther's negative assessment of the Talmud, Johann Heinrich Callenberg (1694-1760) founded the *Institutum Judaicum*, a place for students to learn Hebrew and read from the Talmud.

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<sup>51</sup> Ocker, "Luther and Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism," 2.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>53</sup> See Johann Heinrich Michaelis (1668-1738) and Siegmund Jakob Baumgarten (1706-1757). The latter effectively petitioned for "Theological Consideration for the Conscientious Tolerance of Jews and their Worship among Christians."

At the same time, Judaism also moved on a trajectory towards shared values with Christianity. Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) embraced the universal ideas of the Enlightenment and adapted them to a Jewish framework. He argues that the state should allow and support for “a particular form of Jewish education supplied by specifically Jewish institutions” but that these in turn would be obligated to educate Jews “towards the universal truth of modern society, in order for Jews to fulfill their role as good citizens in a modern civil state.”<sup>54</sup> In this overall sense, Mendelssohn agrees with Immanuel Kant’s universalism but retains a “particular faith orientation of traditional Judaism.”<sup>55</sup> Judaism is no longer in direct opposition to Christianity as they both join philosophically as members of the Enlightenment, and socially as members of the modern state. These two developments, the Pietistic missionary endeavors and the shifts in Judaism, led to a significant conversion movement of Jews to Christianity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, including Mendelssohn’s two daughters and grandchildren.<sup>56</sup>

### **National Socialism**

In a quest to solidify a fractured, and—after World War I—depleted country, Luther was pulled into National Socialist rhetoric to serve as national hero for the secular

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<sup>54</sup> Yoseph Turner, “The Anomaly of Jewish Ethnicity as a Consideration in Contemporary Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Interaction between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art and Literature*, Michael Porthuis, et al. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 423.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 424.

<sup>56</sup> After the early Spener’s and Petersen’s restoration of Luther’s positive Jewish writings, Luther’s influence diminishes. Ocker, “Luther and Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism,” 6.



and religious hero for the religious. Luther's anti-Jewish writings can be found in Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and "just about every anti-Jewish book printed during the Third Reich.... Allusions to and quotations from Luther appeared in Streicher's *Der Stürmer* dozens of times" in the first year of printing alone.<sup>57</sup>

The horrific anti-Semitism that culminates in National Socialism actually developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The National Socialists "did not create this image of him. Religious conviction and national pride had for centuries entwined themselves around this image, especially during the Bismarck era."<sup>58</sup> Kant had already stated that Jews "never will become more useful than harmful to civil society. They are now vampires of society."<sup>59</sup> And even among the religious revivalists, like Friedrich Schleiermacher, anti-Semitism was advancing. To him "Judaism was nothing but 'a system of universal immediate retribution,' which was now totally lifeless."<sup>60</sup>

On a political level, the state of Prussia attempted to unite the many city states of modern day Germany and they needed a national hero for this. And so, as early as 1883, the four-hundredth birthday of Luther, Luther began to serve "as a symbol of national unity" since "religious conviction and national pride had... entwined themselves around

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<sup>57</sup> Michel, *Holy Hatred*, 119. Michel continues by demonstrating Streicher's use of Luther in his Nuremberg Trial defense, and Herman Goering's and Heinrich Himmler's praise for Luther's anti-Jewish statements.

<sup>58</sup> Oberman, *Impact*, 71.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Robert Michel, *Holy Hatred: Christianity, Antisemitism, and the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 127.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

his image.”<sup>61</sup> There was some opposition to this. Theologian Martin Rade began to oppose this as early as 1917 noting that “Luther was a preacher of the Word, a professor of divinity, a *theologian*.” He certainly contributed to many fields, Rade concedes, but his actions “lay not in his German manner... but solely in his faith, in his Christianity.”<sup>62</sup> Luther as national hero is thus not enough. A religious dimension becomes necessary to garner the support of the churches and people. “As Adolf Hitler strategized his way to power, he knew that his anti-Semitic agenda needed to gain the support of theology and the Church.”<sup>63</sup> Gerhard Kittel and Walter Grundmann solidified the theological support for National Socialism’s ideology.

#### Gerhard Kittel

Gerhard Kittel started with an illustrious career that brought him early to the Protestant faculty of the University of Tübingen, where he soon took the position of dean of theology in the footsteps of Adolph Schlatter, one of the most prestigious positions in the country. At the first appearance of the National Socialist party, Kittel joins the party (May 1, 1933) and immediately publishes his most infamous book *Die Judenfrage*.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Oberman, *Impact*, 71. Luther’s contributions extend beyond the field of religion or theology to the areas of education, media, music, and language. These results made him a highly likable individual to be typecast as national hero.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted from Gottfried Maron, “Luther 1917: Beobachtungen zur Literature des 400. Reformationsjubiläums,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 93 (1982): 203.

<sup>63</sup> Oberman, *Impact*, 1.

<sup>64</sup> “Gerhard Kittel’s notorious speech of May 1933, later published as a pamphlet, has been called the most antisemitic utterance of that year.” Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2010), 9.

Here he argues through four possible solutions for the Jewish problem, namely extermination, Zionism (return to a home land), assimilation, or status as “guest people.” He finally settles for the last option stripping Jews of their German citizenship and rights, but his discussion on the first option of extermination is most problematic:

His argument is frightening in its ‘objectivity’: the reason against extermination is first of all practical, not ideological. It did not succeed in Spain or Russia, nor does an outward extermination have any inner meaning. This can be interpreted in different ways, but Kittel’s cool reasoning seems to show a determination that is deeply rooted in his ideology. The ‘Jewish problem’ must be solved.<sup>65</sup>

He later expands on his positive views of Hitler’s policies towards Jews in a lecture: “What the National Socialist Germany has done through the Jewish legislation is not barbarism, but the cold consequence of a sober historical insight, for which the world will have Adolf Hitler to thank.”<sup>66</sup> From 1937 to 1945 Kittel headed *Forschungsabteilung Judenfrage* (Research Department for the Jewish Question) and argues for a racially and morally depraved Jewish race, documented in scripture by the intermarriage as found in Ezra and Nehemiah. He applauds Hitler who eradicates the further deprivation of the Jews by ending the “*Konnuhium* between Jews and non-Jews, and provid[ing] a healthy coercion of assimilated Judaism back to its own foundations and laws.”<sup>67</sup> Kittel’s books and articles feature a scholarly support for the “National Socialist racist agenda”<sup>68</sup> and Hitler himself: “We are full of gratitude to God, that he as

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<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Gerdmar, *Roots*, 456.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 442.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 488.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

the Lord of history has given our people in Adolf Hitler the Führer and deliverer (*Führer und Retter*) from deep trouble.”<sup>69</sup>

Kittel’s theological justification is centered on “the classic scheme of the Old Testament as representing a time of innocence, and later Hellenistic or Palestinian Judaism a time of depravity.”<sup>70</sup> The depravity is a result of the curse of God against the ritualistic Jews. While Kittel labels this *Unheilsgeschichte*, Luther has previously stated that “the Jews are predestined for *Unheil*, calamity and the wrath of God, whereas Christians are predestined for *Heil*, salvation.”<sup>71</sup> Additionally, he criticizes the ritualism and halakhic dialectics of scripture and contrasts this to the moral purity of Jesus. As such he can proclaim that “the whole sea of ritualism has disappeared.”<sup>72</sup> This primitive and corrupt view of OT ritual system can then be found in the *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, as will be argued below.

#### Walter Grundmann

In May 1936 the Wartburg castle hosted the official opening of the *Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben* (Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life). Walter Grundmann was chosen as head of this group with the mission to de Judaize the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 443. Taken from the twelve *Tübinger Sätze*, a confessional statement.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 476.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 600.

<sup>72</sup> Kittel, *Die Probleme des palästinischen Spätjudentums und das Urchristentum*, 124. Quoted in Gerdmar, *Roots*, 430.

German churches.<sup>73</sup> Grundmann saw this event in his opening remarks as significant as Luther's Reformation. Luther overcame the Catholics and likewise Protestants will now overcome Judaism. Grundmann now sets out to purify the Bible from its Jewish influence and "restore [it] to its pristine condition" along with the "destruction of Judaism."<sup>74</sup> This, for Grundmann, entailed the removal of the OT, since it is a Jewish document.<sup>75</sup> The movement grew rapidly reaching about a third of all Protestant church members in Germany. They were enthusiastically pro-Nazi and proudly displayed swastika flags beside the pulpit and the altar. Similar to Kittel, Grundmann recognized that Jews could be baptized and become Christian, nonetheless "German Christian leaders insisted that the Nazi racial laws took precedence and that baptism could not erase race."<sup>76</sup> While Luther and Kittel had retained a view of Jesus as a historical figure with Jewish origin,<sup>77</sup> Grundmann takes an ahistorical view of Jesus. Jesus is not of Semitic origin. Since He is divine, he is other-worldly, clearly not Semitic. Similarly, the OT is treated ahistorically in which the OT is not a book about Jews but "an anti-Jewish book."<sup>78</sup> Abraham Heschel summarizes the activity of the Institute: "What makes the Institute worthy of particular

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<sup>73</sup> Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*, 1.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>77</sup> Kittel allowed for a partial Aryan influence in Jesus' lineage, but asserted that Jesus was by majority Semitic.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 5.

attention is its context: it carried out its program of eradicating the Jewish within Christianity precisely while the Jews of Europe were being deported and murdered.”<sup>79</sup>

## THE LASTING IMPACT

Kittel’s long-lasting achievement has been the *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, which is still “highly esteemed, despite having originated in a National Socialist context.”<sup>80</sup> Kittel along with Grundmann, and seven additional NSDAP members and supporters, made up the majority of the editorial board for this extensive project. Though Kittel himself only wrote a few articles for the dictionary, the general view of Jews and scripture permeate the ten volume dictionary. Extensive critique exposing the “anti-Jewish bias” began with J. S. Vos in 1984,<sup>81</sup> and has since been continued by Maurice Casey,<sup>82</sup> and from a methodological approach, James Barr.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, Meeks observes that “even in TDNT, Kittel implements his critical view of a ‘depraved Judaism.’”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>80</sup> Gerdmar, *Roots*, 475.

<sup>81</sup> J. S. Vos, “Antijudaismus/Antisemitismus im Theologischen Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament”, *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 35 (1984).

<sup>82</sup> Maurice Casey, “Antisemitic Assumptions in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament”, *Novum Testamentum* 41, no. 3 (1999), 291.

<sup>83</sup> James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>84</sup> Meeks, “A Nazi New Testament Professor Reads his Bible: The Strange Case of Gerhard Kittel”, 537–538. Quoted in Gerdmar, 475.

### Example of Ritual Purity

One example of this simplistic view of the OT can be observed in *TDNTs* exposition on purity terminology. The OT and NT have a variety of purity terms including καθαρίζω, ἀκάθαρτος, κοινός, κοινόω, βέβηλος, βεβηλώω, and μαιίνω. In the article on κοινός and κοινόω the *TDNT* attempts to clarify the meaning of the terms largely by relating καθαρίζω to the other terms. It argues that the reference to κοινός impurity in Mark 7:2 clearly corresponds “to the Heb. כִּזְזִי, so that ἀκαθάρτοις would be a more precise translation.”<sup>85</sup> This though conflates two separate terms into one and the *TDNT* assumes, without evidence, that the terms are interchangeable. Notably, other terms are also swappable. The term κοινός can be substituted for the term βέβηλος. The article argues that κοινός should be rendered “‘profane’ as distinct from ἅγιος”<sup>86</sup> though it has already asserted that the “LXX, however, consistently uses βέβηλος for חֵטְא, e.g., Lv. 10:10.”<sup>87</sup> A subform of the previously mentioned ἀκαθάρτοις, ἀκάθαρτος, is also cited, indicating that at least three, possibly four different terms are completely interchangeable. The basis of the argument is not so much exegetical as logical: it makes sense to the author that Mark 7 should relate to uncleanness rather than defilement.

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<sup>85</sup> Friedrich Hauck, “κοινός, κοινωνός, κοινωνέω, κοινωνία, συγκοινωνός, συγκοινωνέω, κοινωνικός, κοινόω,” *TDNT* 3:797.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* The LXX regularly uses βέβηλος/βεβηλώω as equivalent to חֵטְא/חֵטְא though μαιίνω is at times also used. In a corresponding pattern the LXX regularly uses ἀκάθαρτος as equivalent to כִּזְזִי though μαιίνω derivatives are also employed for this category. κοινός is never used to represent either Hebrew term. See the Appendix for details.

In the last twenty years it has been demonstrated that these terms all carry a range of diverse meanings, not identical meanings.<sup>88</sup> In the process of this conflation of the *TDNT*, based on a primitive and debased view of the Jewish ritual system, the texts have been obscured and misrepresented. This has lead Duncan Derrett to offer an apology for the misuse of these terms in history:

For many years, and by this writer amongst others, it has been assumed that κοινός and κοινώω . . . ought to be rendered “unclean” and “to render unclean.” . . . It is painful to admit an error, and to have helped to mislead others. The facts should be set out, in order that those who occupy themselves with Christ’s attitude to purity and impurity, may start from the right starting-point.<sup>89</sup>

Jewish scholars like E. P. Sanders, Jacob Neusner, and Jacob Milgrom are only a few of the scholars that have changed the perception of the Jewish religion and faith from the 1970s onward. But this is still a process, and much work lies ahead to shed the mighty influence of anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic theological reference works and writings.

## SUMMARY

Luther’s position on Jews is ambiguous, but certainly not neutral—at times Jews receive support but at other times they are—at the very least—insulted. While he is not

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<sup>88</sup> See e.g. Mikeal C. Parsons, “‘Nothing Defiled and Unclean’: The Conjunction’s Function in Acts 10:14,” *PRSt* 27, no. 3 (2000): 268; Christian Stettler, “Purity of Heart in Jesus’ Teaching: Mark 7:14–23 as an Expression of Jesus’ *Basileia* Ethics,” *JTS* 55, no. 2 (2004): 472; .” Colin House, “Defilement by Association: Some Insights from the Usage of κοινός/κοινώω in Acts 10 and 11,” *AUSS* 21, no. 2 (1983): 143–153; Clinton L. Wahlen, *Jesus and the Impurity of Spirits in the Synoptic Gospels* (WUNT 185; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 72–81; Clinton L. Wahlen, “Peter’s Vision and Conflicting Definitions of Purity,” *NTS* 51, no. 4 (2005): 505–518. J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Κοινός, Κοινώω,” in *Jesus among Biblical Exegetes* (vol. 6 of *Studies in the New Testament*; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 111.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*



opposed to the Jewish race, he writes in vitriolic language against the Jewish faith, and in particular, the Jewish believer. While he cannot be blamed directly for the horrific actions of the Holocaust, nonetheless he laid a foundation and precedent. The National Socialist, and the imperialists before, instrumentalized Luther's harsh words for their own nefarious purposes. Sadly, theologians such as Kittel and Grundmann lent their influence and skills to the cause of National Socialism, making it even more acceptable to the church. To this day, Kittel's and Grundmann's anti-Semitic views are still being transmitted to readers of the *TDNT* and other dictionaries and works. The long-lasting anti-Semitic influence that Kittel and Grundmann have had to this day is astonishing and troubling. It has shaped Protestant faith and scholarship by means of the *TDNT*.<sup>90</sup>

#### Lessons

The humbling truth is that intellect alone does not protect from danger. Even the most accomplished theologians are not free from the danger of being strapped before the wrong cart. Luther's words were not the only influence: the pseudo-science of eugenics, the theory of *Religionsgeschichte* also lent their hand to build a cohesive, but morally reprehensible, church and state construct.<sup>91</sup> Finally, a veneration of Luther as a national and religious hero naturally lead to a glorification of Hitler, who portrayed himself as the enactor of Luther's supposed national and religious program.

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<sup>90</sup> This is not to say that every entry in the dictionary is necessarily tainted by anti-Semitic thought or that the *TDNT* is useless.

<sup>91</sup> These points have not yet been argued in this article due to limitations of space. They project further directions of study to more fully understand the development of intellectual support for the National Socialist agenda.

As a German I am ashamed and contrite of the history of my forefathers—how the words of scripture were instrumentalized for personal glorification, nation building, and the heinous acts of dehumanizing and annihilating fellow human beings.

As a theologian I am appalled by the blanket support scholars gave to the powerful instead of caring for the oppressed.

As a Protestant and heir of the Reformation—as difficult as that terminology itself is—I am disturbed by the carelessness of words used by Luther and others spoken for effect rather than for edification; spoken out of fear rather than trust in God.

May God forgive me for my carelessness, for my rash words, for my misuse of scripture. May we all look to Christ and follow his instruction to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31).