Luther’s Stellung zu den Juden /

Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland während des Reformationszeitalters

Von

Dr. Reinhold Lewin

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A contribution to the history of Jews in Germany during the age of reformation

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Introduction

This book aims at scientifically analyzing the writings of Martin Luther in context with his position on the Jews by examining his publications and personal experiences with the Jewish population. Examined will also be the general social conditions of the Jews in Germany in the 16th century.

Luther's position on the Jews before 1521

When in 1513 a dispute erupted between the scholar Johann Reuchlin and the Cologne Dominicans about the confiscation of rabbinical works, Martin Luther was approached to give his opinion on the matter. Luther's reply came fast; in it he supported Reuchlin's approach and criticized the Jews for reviling and blaspheming against God and his king Christ. God's anger flared up against the Jews and they became stubborn and incorrigible, so Luther. Between 1513 - 1516 Martin Luther held lectures at the university of Wittenberg about psalter; according to him the Jews do not know anything about God's laws and justice and walk on the path of the godless and mislead others. Nullities and absurdness of their delusions are interpreted into the Bible and Jews deceitfully twist it for their own purposes; they are averse to the truth and are eager to lie. They only listen to their own chatter and with their dead literature they desecrate the Bible, that is why they are shutting themselves off from the teachings of Christ. However, Jews are still going to their death for their Torah which creates the apparent effect as if they loved God with all their heart. Luther goes on to insult the Jews and calls them nasty and unfaithful and they will be humiliated and trampled on like the feces in the street and the dust on the paths. The same sentences re-appear in Luther's writings in the following time, hardly changed and sometimes even repeated literally. The Jews are a cursed nation because they are godless – only Christ can save them from their physical and mental imprisonment. And yet is the heavy criticism that Luther has for the Jewish people until 1521 pure bookish knowledge as he hardly knew any Jewish people or read any Jewish literature – mostly so, because he did not have any knowledge of the Hebrew language and had to rely solely on secondary literature.

The Jews' visit in Worms, its meaning and consequences

In April 1521 two Jews come to meet with Luther. What he saw then made him change his view about the Jews. When Luther asked for an interpretation for the verse *"Behold, a virgin shall conceive…"* (Isaiah 7, 14) the two Jews started to argue with one another and left under the laughter of the people who surrounded them. The fact that those two Jews came to see him and showed interest in him and in his teachings made Luther realize that Jews were not necessarily stubborn and unwilling to learn but rather did not understand the Christian teachings. He used to believe that the Jews were turning their back on Christianity; they surrendered to lies and are reluctant to see the truth. Not a heavenly wonder is needed to convert Jews, but the insight of a normal human being. So what is the reason that the Jews still haven't received Christ's message of salvation after 1500 years? In the days of the "Diet of Worms", when Luther lead the division of Christianity, which made it impossible for him to remain within the Catholic church, he realized that the Jews were preached the "wrong kind" of Christianity all those years. It was not the pure gospel but an artificial statue, distorted by the pope by additions and falsifications which – so Luther – understandably repelled the Jews. With his new interpretation of the Old Testament the Jews should be eager to convert to Christianity, so Luther's conviction. For this to succeed, it must happen with mildness and patience, as a hard and unkind behavior deters the Jews and gives them a wrong impression of the religion of Christ.

That Jesus Christ was born a Jew. 1523

In 1523 Luther published a treatise in which he tried to prove Christ's virgin birth and his deity from passages of the Old Testament. Accusations that Christ came from the semen of Abraham, meaning that he was a naturally conceived offspring of Abraham, were dismissed by Luther as pure nonsense or a bad joke. In its introduction he argues that Jews had been right to refuse Christianity coming from the "papal paganism" and added:

> *"If I had been a Jew and had seen such fools and blockheads teach the Christian faith, I should rather have turned into a pig than become a Christian."*

He goes on to discuss the fact that Christ was born through the virgin birth, being from the tribe of Yehuda, making him spiritual and physical at the same time, being God and human in one. Although he appears to speak nicely about the Jews in his essay, he only sees them as an object that must be converted in the future. The Jews have to be instructed that Christ is the Messiah and then slowly make them accept the belief that he is a man-God:

> *"If the Jews should take offense because we confess our Jesus to be a man, and yet true God, we will deal forcefully with that from Scripture in due time. But this is too harsh for a beginning. Let them first be suckled with milk, and begin by recognizing this man Jesus as the true Messiah; after that they may drink wine, and learn also that he is true God."*

Luther's expectation was that after the publication of his book, there would be a high increase in Jews who would get baptized after having realized that Christ was their true God and savior.

Luther's personal experiences with the Jews and his position towards them between 1524 – 1536

The development of Luther's relationship to the Jews was ascending and reached a peak in 1524. Although Luther was hoping that the number of Jewish baptisms would increase, it seems however, that there was no considerable change. He did baptize many Jews, but it was reported to him that because of their stubbornness, those people never truly accepted the new faith. This led to the Jews being one of Luther's bitterest enemies, apart from the Turks and the pope.

Around 1530, Luther wrote about one specific event which changed his opinion of the Jewish people for the worse. Three Jews came to Luther for a religious discussion but proved to be learned and unwilling to accept Luther's interpretation of Isaiah. By the end of the conversation Luther had written a letter of recommendation for the Jewish scholars that would allow them to travel safely on the German streets and they would not need to pay the taxes. The letter, however, was signed with "in the name of Jesus Christ" which made the group reject it and tear it up.

Stories like the one above made Luther increasingly hostile towards the Jews, also because of their persistent resistance of Luther's truth and their stubbornness in holding on to the traditional Jewish interpretation of Holy Scripture. Throughout the time between 1524 – 1536 Luther came across inconveniences and unpleasantness regarding the Jews. Luther, feeling bitter, decided from this point on to never have anything to do with the Jews.

Luther's relationship to the Jewish interpretation of Scripture

Luther translated the Old and the New Testament into German. The Hebrew language however, remained difficult for him and he never managed to fully learn it. He sharply attacked rabbis and their interpretation and commentaries to the Old Testament. The Jews produce dreams and fairy tales which give no true indication of the Bible, they are blind and stubborn; they torture themselves with the Talmud and the rabbinic works which make them cursed infront of God. The Hebrew language was not preserved purely; divine justice and a redeemer of all mankind is foreign to them; a defiled nation that defiles everything around them. Luther used many vulgar and violent expressions to attack the Jews and their rabbis to show his deep disgust and hatred towards them. Rabbinic commentaries to holy writings are labelled absurd, ridiculous, shameful twaddle, mad silliness and more.

Josel of Rosheim 1537. The letter against the Sabbatarians 1538

In August 1536 Elector of Saxony John Frederick the Magnanimous passed an edict which expelled the Jews from his territory. The persecution of the Jews happened with cruelty and ruthlessness. At the same time a Jewish spokesman appeared, who continuously defended the Jews infront of the emperor, electors and principalities and who became their lawyer who supported their rights: Josel of Rosheim. He wrote a letter to the elector of Saxony, requesting him to deal with the Jews with mercy and compassion, according to the teachings of the holy Paul. In addition to that, Josel approached Martin Luther with the plea for mediation, because he had interpreted Luther's writings from 1523 as being tolerant towards the Jewish population. Josel's letters to Luther bore no fruit – his answer to Josel, was

respectful towards him but was filled with anti-Jewish polemics because of their unwillingness and stubbornness to accept Jesus as their savior.

Luther's next publication in 1538 was an open letter and was called *"A letter from Martin Luther against the Sabbatarians: to a good friend",* referring to the Jewish observation of the Sabbath. The letter discusses theologically based complaints against the Jewish people. It deals with the 1500-year exile of the Jews. The Jews have been living far away from Jerusalem in exile without their temple and the laws that come with it. God gave a promise to Abraham and since it is nonsense to accuse God of lying and for not keeping his promise, the Jews must ask themselves what went wrong because God does not lie or deceive. That is why it is obvious that their exile and misery is due to their sins. This argument must bring every sensible Jew, even the most stubborn one, to accept the Christian faith, against their own lazy, useless lies and nonsense.

Luther goes on to discuss the duration and validity of the Jewish laws. The Jews believe that it was given to them forever until the Messiah's arrival. Luther states that the Jewish laws cannot be kept outside of Palestine. God made a new covenant, different than the one of Moses because the Jews have sinned and broke their previous one.

> *"It is evident that he [God] has forsaken them, that they can no longer be his people and that the true Lord, the Messiah, must have come fifteen hundred years ago."*

On the Jews and their Lies. Vom Schem Hamphoras 1543

In 1542 Luther heard the news about the expulsion of the Jews in Boehmen and almost entirely out of the Roman Empire. Feeling pitty with the Jews, he argued that the Jews nonetheless do not want to repent and stop mocking the Christian faith. The first part of his work deals with the four arguments that the Jews use when defending their faith: the parentage of Abraham, the circumcision, the giving of the laws on Mount Sinai and the ownership of Kanaan, Jerusalem and the temple. Luther then goes on to discuss the awaiting of the Messiah, which he proves with verses from the Hebrew Bible.

In the second part he discusses advice on how to treat the Jews. Tolerance is forbidden and revenge is inadmissible. Their synagogues should be burned and destroyed, as well as their houses, take away their prayer books and their Talmudists, forbid their rabbis to teach under threat of execution, prohibit them to use the streets, prohibit them to perform usury and force the young, strong male and female Jews to work to drive out their laziness:

> *"First to set fire to their synagogues or 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 of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians… Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. For they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues. Instead they might be lodged under a roof or in a barn, like the gypsies…Third, I advise that all 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 henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb… 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 they stay at home. Sixth, I advise that usury be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping… Seventh, I commend 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…"*

In his second work in 1543, Luther wrote *"Vom Schem Hamphoras"* (Of the Unknowable Name and the Generations of Christ). In it, Luther again uses vulgar and aggressive language directed at the Jews. The book title is the Hebrew expression of the unspeakable name of God, the tetragrammaton. Luther went on to insult the Jews and equate them with the devil.

The effect of both writings. Last Words of David 1543. The warning against the Jews 1546

Luther's later works cannot compare to the success of his book about the Jews from 1523. There was hardly any positive reception for his polemic and vulgar writings. As an example for the criticism, even from within his faith, is the Swiss reformer Bullinger who complained about the dirty language used, which is not fitting for a theologist. His book *"Schem Hamphoras"* was unbearable and laments Luther's

murderous hatred of the Jews. Similarly, from within Germany arose quiet and secret disapproval, as Luther overestimated the effect that his works would have on German society and politics. The great advocate for the Jews, Josel of Rosheim, worked with all his might to prevent the distribution of Luther's writings and succeeded with the prohibition of printing them in Strasbourg. In the mean time, the Jews of Hesse again received a more stringent treatment and had to suffer many persecutions, the reason for this Rosheim attributed to Luther's writings. However, with Emperor Charles V. he was more successful and received a privilege for the Jews which granted and confirmed Jews all rights and freedoms.

In 1543 Luther's book *"Last Words of David"* was published. The main mission of this work is to prove that the Messiah is a man-God and to clarify the trinity. The Jews are mentioned occasionally, condescendingly, in a row with heretics, papists and Turks. In its introduction Luther writes about the Jews, mentions how Rabbis do not coincide with one another's interpretations, they do not understand the Bible, because they do not have the New Testament to correctly interpret God's words.

When Luther visited his home, the country of Mansfeld, in 1546 he notices a larger number of Jewish communities, who seemed to have settled there after having been expelled from the country of Magdeburg. In February 1546, he preached four sermons in Eisleben, in which he accuses the Jews of lying and blaspheming by making of the Christian's trinity three separate Gods; he compares them to the devil and accuses them of wanting to murder Christ and the Christians. Several days before his death, Luther publishes his last work the *"Warning against the Jews"*. In it he explains the great damage the Jews make. The Jews should be dealt with in a Christian manner at first. Christian faith should be offered to them, so that they would accept the Messiah. If they accept to be converted, abandon their usury, and receive Christ, then the Christians would willingly regard them as their brothers. Otherwise, nothing will come out of it.

> *"They are our public enemies. They do not stop blaspheming our Lord Christ, calling the Virgin Mary a whore, Christ, a bastard, and us changelings or abortions. If they could kill us all, they would gladly do*

it. They do it often, especially those who pose as physicians – though sometimes they help – for the devil helps to finish it in the end."

Four days later, on February 18, 1546 Luther dies but his hatred against the Jews lives on through the centuries.