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Martin Luther and the Jews

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I. Introduction

For a long time now I have studiously avoided an in-depth study of the topic of "Luther and the Jews" even though it was Luther who initially raised the issue of Jewish-Christian relations for me in a powerful way. It was while I was working as a book editor for Fortress Press that I was given the assignment of working with Dr. Franklin Sherman in the preparation of Volume 47 of *Luther's Works* which contained Luther's infamous *On the Jews and Their Lies*.¹ The experience of working with this material was one factor in my decision to make Jewish-Christian relations a focus of my Ph.D. program, and when I began to look for a dissertation topic I considered doing it on Luther and the Jews; however, the secondary literature was so overwhelming—and so emotionally charged—that I chose the more limited and somewhat safer topic of "The Attitudes of the Strasbourg Reformers toward Jews and Judaism".²

In my dissertation and subsequent teaching in this area, however, I have developed some convictions about Jewish-Christian relations in the sixteenth century that I now want to try to relate expressly to Martin Luther. I will begin by examining the attitudes of three of Luther's important contemporaries: Martin Bucer (1491–1551), Johannes Eck (1486–1543) and Johannes Pfefferkorn (d. ca. 1522). This will provide some necessary context for the study of Luther, for as Heiko Oberman has pointed out: "A fair evaluation of 'Luther and the Jews' cannot be achieved without thorough study of his contemporaries' views on the subject."³ The essay will then attempt to set forth Luther's attitudes toward the Jews and

relate them to those of Bucer, Eck and Pfefferkorn. A final section will examine the findings of this essay in relation to some recent literature on the subject.

II. Martin Bucer, Johannes Eck, and Johannes Pfefferkorn on the Jews

Martin Bucer was a leading reformer of the city of Strasbourg who was well known as an irenic and conciliatory theologian in his relationships with the papal establishment church as well as in handling disputes between the various segments of the Reformation movement. Although Bucer sought valiantly to be a mediating theologian, it is generally accepted that his own theological position was basically sympathetic to the Reformed tradition. In 1538 he was invited by Landgrave Philip the Magnanimous of Hesse to come to his territories to deal with the Anabaptist problem there. While he was in Hesse, Bucer was also asked to offer his views on the toleration of Jews, and he and six Hessian clergy, who constituted Philip's chief theological advisers, submitted a *Ratschlag* or "Advice" to the landgrave on December 17, 1538, which dealt with this subject. Although Bucer was only one of seven signatories to the *Ratschlag*, his name was at the top of the list, and the *Ratschlag* is universally recognized as his handiwork.

Bucer devotes considerable space in the *Ratschlag* to a historical and theological discussion of the question of the toleration of Jews. Many Christian emperors and bishops have tolerated Jews, basing their argument on salvation history which stresses the Jews' election: in line with this argumentation, since the Jews are God's "ancient people" and "because their root is holy", Bucer suggests that it may be part of God's plan for the Jews to be tolerated.⁴ But there is another side to this historical and theological issue which Bucer clearly finds attractive: some Christian kings, princes and cities have also expelled their Jews on the basis of the theological argument that where the Jews are present there is "severe blaspheming of our Lord Jesus Christ and his sacred religion."⁵ Bucer also sees the justification for this position and maintains that those who have taken such action should not be censured.⁶ Bucer's own compromise solution to this dilemma is the proposal that the Jews be tolerated because of history, tradition and their

special status, but with the understanding that the authorities are responsible for seeing to it that the damage to the Christian religion is prevented "as much as possible".⁷ He proposes four guidelines for protecting the Christian religion. First, there must be no blaspheming of Christ and the Christian religion, and the Jewish religion must be observed along the lines laid down by Moses and the prophets; divergent Talmudic teachings and observances are not permitted. Second, the Jews may not erect new synagogues. Third, they may not dispute about religion with Christians; the exception to this is that they may do so "with those preachers who have been assigned this responsibility." Fourth, they are to come to the special services arranged for them.⁸

These themes and arguments as they are put forward in this historical and theological section of the *Ratschlag* are quite traditional and reflect the two sides of the inherited Christian view about the place of the Jews within salvation history. This view has its roots in Romans 11:28 where the Jews are paradoxically viewed as "enemies of God", yet also as "beloved for the sake of their forefathers".

It is only when Bucer moves beyond the theological discussion to the consideration of the economic and social disadvantages resulting from the toleration of Jews that some new emphases become apparent in his argumentation. The section in which Bucer discusses the issue from a social and economic point of view is lengthy⁹ and emotionally charged. Bucer writes:

For the Jews are also burdensome to the Christians in the economic sphere, and with their usury and other financial tricks, like unscrupulous buying and selling, they make themselves into the Christians' lords and masters on the basis of the Christians' work and sweat. This is against the law of God and of the Christian emperors, for they are to be the Christians' servants and are to be subservient to them. Thus every authority is responsible to see to it that this offense is regulated and eliminated.¹⁰

Bucer proposes two regulations to achieve this end, namely, prohibiting the Jews from engaging in usury and prohibiting their involvement in all types of trade.

Bucer's major argument in the above passage is that the Jews are supposed to be the servants and the Christians the masters. His proof-text for this claim is Deuteronomy 28:43-44: "The sojourner who is among you shall rise above you and

always remain above you; but you shall come down lower and always remain lower. He shall lend to you, and you shall not lend to him; he shall be the head, and you shall be the tail.”¹¹ It is this “divine law” that Bucer calls on the authorities to enforce. Bucer attempts to gain additional credence for this Old Testament argument by reminding the reader of the curse that the Jews had brought on themselves in the New Testament era. Through their “unbelief and rejection of Christ” and because of “the blood of the Lord, his dear apostles, and so many martyrs”, God’s judgment lies on them, and God-fearing authorities should see to it that they pay the price for this and do not benefit from it.¹² But where they can boast that they are “the lords”, they act the part and they and their children refuse service, “whereas it often happens that our people serve them, as when they make fire, cook, wash, and do other work for them on the Sabbath.”¹³ Bucer grows even more brutally specific as he spells out the meaning of Deuteronomy 28:43–44 in its wider implications. He writes:

Therefore no Christian governors, to whom religion and good government are dear, will permit these enemies of Christ, the Jews, if they are going to tolerate them at all, to practise the merchant’s trade or that of second-hand dealing. For, as God commanded, they are to be at the bottom and not on top, the tail and not the head; according to the Lord’s own explanation they are to be kept in such a way that they have to borrow from our people and not our people from them. Indeed, they will not permit them to engage in the clean and respectable trades, and particularly not in those where the worth of the goods is dependent on the reputation and good faith of the tradesman. Further, they will relegate them to the most despicable, burdensome, and unpleasant jobs: mining, other kinds of digging and making of fortifications, breaking stones and chopping wood, making charcoal, cleaning out chimneys and latrines, being flayers and the like.¹⁴

The kind of work he is suggesting for the Jews, Bucer claims, does them no spiritual harm; indeed, it is “advantageous” for them and it demonstrates “the true love that we owe them that we put them in their place, and into the lowest and most burdensome place, as God himself has commanded, so long as we keep them in this place with compassion and mercy.”¹⁵

Why was the usually irenic and conciliatory Bucer on the hostile and intolerant end of the spectrum in his attitudes toward the Jews? I have already indicated that I believe we must

interpret Bucer's views within the broad social and economic context. As he addresses the question of the toleration of Jews, Bucer is voicing much of the frustration of those whom Thomas Brady has labelled the "little people", the people who were "the small merchants, shopkeepers, and artisans".¹⁶ Bucer had his background in this group—his father had been a cooper in Sélestat—and even as a cleric he was in the ranks of the people's priests (*Leutpriester*). In his clerical role he is perceived by Miriam Usher Chrisman as one of "a whole group of evangelical preachers coming from the masses themselves [who] voiced the pent-up rage and frustration of their class."¹⁷

Bucer's identification with the "little people" in his society and his alienation from the Jews who are seen as economic threats to this group is very evident. His perception is that the Jews are powerful and wealthy and that they use their power and wealth to the great disadvantage of his own "poor" people. Bucer even allows his identification with the "little people" and his hostility toward the Jews to drive a wedge between him and his patron, Landgrave Philip. Commenting on the Jews' reaction to the tasks that the *Ratschlag* would reserve for them, Bucer writes in his May 10, 1539, "Letter to a 'Good Friend'":

It is not surprising that the Jews were horrified at the prospect of these tasks. For they have become accustomed, with the ungodly complicity of our authorities, to lead a decadent, selfish, and idle life on the blood and sweat of poor Christians, which they suck out of them through usury.¹⁸

All of the above illustrate the importance of the socio-economic dimension in Bucer's arguments against the Jews.

Johannes Eck has gone into the history books as Martin Luther's formidable opponent at the Leipzig Debate (1519) and one of the leading theologians defending the papal establishment church in the sixteenth century. He addressed the Jewish question in 1541 when some Jews in the Upper Palatinate were charged with a case of ritual murder and submitted as part of their defense an anonymous work which called into question the charge of ritual murder that was a phenomenon in the late middle ages in Europe. Eck was convinced (quite correctly) that the work in question was written by Andreas Osiander, the Lutheran reformer of Nuremberg. Eck's own

treatise, *Refutation of a Jew-Book*,¹⁹ sought to discredit Oslander's work and to demonstrate the general validity of the ritual murder charge against the Jews.

Like Bucer, Eck in his *Refutation* makes comments on the Jews that seem at times mainly theological and at other times mainly socio-economic. From the theological perspective, he stresses the fact that the Jews are in exile and are being punished by God because they crucified Christ:

... they are scattered throughout the world. They have no king, no princes, no nobility, no temple, no sacrifices. They live in fear day and night and are always uncertain of their life and property; they are cursed and despised.... We see God's wrath over them in accordance with their cry: "His blood be on us and our children."²⁰

Tolerated, but living in exile and misery—this is the way Jews are to experience life within the Christian community. However, when Eck moves into the socio-economic dimension or level of his thinking he no longer sees the Jews living in exile and misery but rather as living in luxury. Their prosperity and success are extremely troubling to him, and he writes:

They live among us, particularly in Germany, in idleness and ease as if they were our lords and we were here to maintain them through our work in their wretched laziness. They live in style and luxury and pomp on the basis of Christian goods, blood and sweat.

This picture of the lazy, idle Jew lording it over the poor, hardworking German peasant or artisan was certain to arouse the feelings of "the poor Christians" and "the common man" who are frequently mentioned in Eck's treatise.²¹ Eck seems to paint his picture with this class confrontation in mind: over against the German working classes stand the Jews and their allies, the princes and nobles who know that the Jews are ill-treating the "poor Christians" and do nothing about it. In fact, the upper classes are in league with the Jews because of their greed for the Jews' money: "If you ask a nobleman why he tolerates Jews in his town, he will answer, 'The three or four Jews I have in town bring in more than all my peasants.'"²² Such an answer, according to Eck, overlooks the fact that, since the Jews do not do any constructive work, this money comes from usury (that has been taken from the "poor Christians"). Eck resents the privileged position which the Jews enjoy because of their usury, and he wants to see the roles reversed once again, so that they will again be in accord with God's will and the imperial law. He writes:

The Jews should be treated among Christians the way the Turks treat them: they have to work with their hands and sustain themselves by the sweat of their brows by doing the meanest work. For they are to be the servants of the Christians, as St. Augustine says. Thus they should be kept in a servile condition and not in honour. In the towns they should sweep the streets, clean out the toilets, remove dead animals from the streets and flay them; they should dig ditches and do other kinds of work with their hands, like hacking, digging, rooting out weeds, carrying out manure, cleaning out the slaughterhouses, etc.²³

Eck tries to fit his proposal into a theological framework by concluding that if his suggestions were followed the Jews would ultimately benefit:

If we would keep them in this contemptible state, as they are kept by the Muslims, they would remember that they came into this Roman imprisonment because their forebears killed God's Messiah. Then they would value the prophecies more highly, recognize who they are and who Christ is, and would let themselves be baptized.²⁴

In spite of Eck's attempt to make his attack on the Jews sound theological, it is obvious that the real thrust of his argument is socio-economic and cultural.

Johannes Pfefferkorn is the third figure who provides important context for the topic of Luther and the Jews. Pfefferkorn, a convert from Judaism, burst on to the scene in 1507 with a series of treatises attacking the Jews.²⁵ When Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522), a noted Hebraist and humanist scholar, challenged Pfefferkorn on the burning of the Talmud and other Hebrew books, the controversy became the cause célèbre of the early sixteenth century.

Pfefferkorn's views are characterized by his willingness to use varying degrees of coercion and even violence to try to bring the Jews to conversion. Thus, he writes that if the Jews would come to Christian services and "be forced to listen to the sermons in which their despicable life is mocked, then undoubtedly the fire of understanding would be kindled in their hearts."²⁶ Furthermore, he writes, "it would undoubtedly be a useful and honourable and godly work if the Talmud and other of their erroneous rabbinical books... would be taken from them and destroyed."²⁷

Because of the Jews' nature which Pfefferkorn says is "worse than the devil's",²⁸ they not only "try to damage and destroy the Christians' precious souls, but they also try to do the same

to their goods and possessions.”²⁹ This social and economic criticism of the Jews is a crucial element in Pfefferkorn’s argumentation. It prompts him to criticize the “Christian princes, cities, and others who keep the blasphemous and ungracious enemies of our God and our holy Christian faith” in their territories for the sake of the temporal gain that these “accursed and damned bloodhounds suck and pull out of the blood and sweat of your poor miserable subjects.”³⁰ Pfefferkorn’s orientation is clearly in the direction of the poor and exploited “subjects” and over against the governing authorities who profit from the Jews. Pfefferkorn states that he knows of places “where the Jews are more respected and privileged than the Christians” and where the Jews, rather than the common people, are called the authorities’ “loyal treasure chests”.³¹

Pfefferkorn’s most drastic solution to the problem as he sees it is to suggest the expulsion of the Jews:

Are there not many places—cities and countries like France, Spain, Denmark, etc., and also Nuremberg, Ulm, Nördlingen, etc.,—where Jews used to live and now have been driven out? So I ask, what will such action hurt and what will be the problem? If these cities and countries acted well, then you should follow their example for the sake of your soul’s salvation.³²

Expulsion of the Jews, however, is not the only possible course of action. “Expel them,” he writes, “or forbid them to practise usury.”³³ In connection with the proposal to keep the Jews but under strongly altered conditions, Pfefferkorn again reveals his working-class orientation, for one of the conditions for keeping the Jews would be to make them “work the way we Christians have to”.³⁴ Even converts from Judaism “must learn to earn their bread by working as we Christians do”.³⁵

Pfefferkorn spells out very clearly the work he has in mind for the Jews. In his *Hostis judaeorum* he writes:

They are to be driven to labours, but not those that are honourable and respectable. Rather, they are to be driven to the dirty tasks, for instance, to sweep and clean the streets, to scrape the soot off of chimneys and also to clear the heaped ashes of hearths, to sweep up excrement, to gather together the flesh of pigs, the carcasses of cattle and to carry them away and flay them, and other duties that are of this kind.³⁶

III. Martin Luther and the Jews

In the preceding discussions, which were intended to provide a context for Luther's views, an obvious pattern has emerged: all three authors (Bucer, Eck and Pfefferkorn) share a common theological tradition in relation to the Jews and their place in salvation history. This theological tradition speaks of both acceptance and rejection of Jews. According to this tradition there are theological reasons why Christians should continue to be concerned about Jews, and the desire to convert Jews, which is a strong motif in Bucer, Eck and Pfefferkorn, is an expression of such Christian concern. But there are also, according to this tradition, theological reasons why Jews experience rejection both religiously and socially, and all three authors discuss the Jews' rejection and "misery" in theological terms. Such theological discussions, however, do not exhaust what our three authors have to say in relation to Jews and Judaism. Socio-economic observations and arguments, which go much further in their attacks on the Jews than do the theological arguments and which are often legitimized by being given a theological veneer, are basic to the interpretations of Bucer, Eck and Pfefferkorn. Mark Edwards rightly observes that "the logic of religious anti-Semitism [which I would prefer to label 'theological anti-Judaism'] leads to attempts at conversion, not to genocide."³⁷ When these authors move in the direction of threatening the actual physical well-being and continued existence of Jews within their communities (as the foregoing presentations make it clear that they do), the argumentation tends to be based on socio-economic rather than theological considerations. The aim of this section of the essay will be to show that Martin Luther fits very well into the patterns of understanding found in Bucer, Eck and Pfefferkorn.

As with the other authors, so with Luther the discussion starts with the theological understanding of how Jews fit into salvation history. The somewhat more positive side of Luther's views on this subject comes out in the story of Luther's encounter in 1537 with Rabbi Josel of Rosheim, a leader among the Jews and a man who could be described as the chief public relations officer of the Jewish communities in the Holy Roman Empire. Josel was requesting Luther to intervene with the elector of Saxony on behalf of the Jewish community there,

but Luther refused to do so, citing as his reason for this some “things” that Jews were undertaking that were abusive of the good will that Luther had shown toward them and that robbed him of all influence he might have had with the elector.³⁸ Nevertheless Luther insisted that “one should treat the Jews in a kindly manner”, and proposed—no doubt as a demonstration of this kindness—to write a treatise for them “to see if I cannot win some from your venerable tribe of the patriarchs and prophets and bring them to your promised Messiah.”³⁹ Both the appeal for kind treatment and the desire to convert at least some Jews to Christ demonstrate that Luther was not without feelings of concern for the well-being of Jews.

The negative pole of this same tradition was the conviction that the Jews’ present life was to be an expression of their broken relationship with God because of their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. Their exile from their promised land was a tangible expression of their punishment, and their day to day life was also supposed to mirror this punishment and rejection. On the one level, Luther finds much evidence that the life of Jews is being lived out according to these guidelines from salvation history. He writes that they are “miserable and accursed people” who live in “exile and wretchedness”.⁴⁰ Although he claims that they “have failed to learn any lesson from the terrible distress that has been theirs for over fourteen hundred years in exile”, Luther is certain that “such ruthless wrath of God... is proof that the Jews, surely rejected by God, are no longer his people, and neither is he any longer their God.”⁴¹ Sometimes, as in *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Luther sees the judgment of God in such absolute terms that he holds out little hope for the conversion of the Jews: “... what God cannot reform with such cruel blows, we will be unable to change with words and works.”⁴² Thus, Luther’s *On the Jews and Their Lies* does not constitute “talking with the Jews but about the Jews and their dealings, so that our Germans, too, might be informed.”⁴³

On another level, however, Luther finds that the Jews are not living a life that is consistent with the theme of exile and misery. When he moves on to this level, which is the level of socio-economic analysis and critique, his arguments become much sharper and more emotional. The following quotation expresses sentiments that are repeated many times in the course of *On the Jews and Their Lies*:

A person who is unacquainted with the devil might wonder why they are so particularly hostile toward us Christians. They have no reason to act this way, since we show them every kindness. They live among us, enjoy our shield and protection, they use our country and our highways, our markets and our streets. Meanwhile our princes and rulers sit there and snore with mouths hanging open and permit the Jews to take, steal, and rob from their open moneybags and treasures whatever they want. That is, they let the Jews, by means of their usury, skin and fleece them and their subjects and make them beggars with their own money. For the Jews, who are exiles, should really have nothing, and whatever they have must surely be our property. They do not work... and yet they are in possession of our goods and are our masters in our own country and in their exile.⁴⁴

The element of social protest is unmistakable in this quotation. Luther expresses artisan-guildsman-peasant hostility toward those who are idle and do not work; the honest toil of the worker is contrasted to the dishonest usury of the Jew. Also significant is the feeling of powerlessness that Luther expresses, the feeling that the cards are stacked against the man/woman on the street. Luther's perception is that the princes and the Jews are somehow in collusion. The princes permit the Jews to practise usury, and Luther realizes that many governments consider Jews to be beneficial because they contribute large sums of money to the state treasury. But Luther points out that the money comes from the subjects who "are obliged to pay additional taxes and let themselves be ground into the dust for the Jews, so that they may remain in the country."⁴⁵ At one point Luther even seems to threaten the princes with the spectre of civil disorder and insurrection because of their leniency toward the Jews: "If you great lords and princes will not forbid such usurers the highway legally, some day a troop may arise against them."⁴⁶

What, then, should be done with the Jews? Luther uses a term with a theological ring to describe his general approach to the Jews: "... we must practise a sharp mercy to see whether we might save at least a few from the glowing flames."⁴⁷ But when he comes to translate his "sharp mercy" into concrete proposals, the proposals sound rather like attempts to get even with a group that has been as much a socio-economic threat as a religious one. His proposals—which have been noted and repeated by every anti-Semite and everyone who wants to make

of Luther an anti-Semite—are indeed horrendous: he wants to destroy their synagogues, homes, prayer books and Talmudic writings; forbid their rabbis to teach; abolish safe-conduct for them on the highways; prohibit usury to them and put aside all their cash, silver and gold “for safekeeping”; put “a flail, an ax, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the hands of young, strong Jews and Jewesses” and have them “earn their bread in the sweat of their brow”, instead of, as is now the case, having them “feasting and farting, and on top of all, boasting blasphemously of their lordship over the Christians.”⁴⁸ If these proposals do not find favour, Luther has a final suggestion:

But if we are afraid that they might harm us or our wives, children, servants, cattle, etc., if they had to serve and work for us—for it is reasonable to assume that such noble lords of the world and venomous, bitter worms are not accustomed to working and would be very reluctant to humble themselves so deeply before the accursed Goyim—then let us emulate the common sense of other nations such as France, Spain, Bohemia, etc., compute with them how much their usury has extorted from us, divide this amicably, but then eject them forever from the country.⁴⁹

The high degree of agreement that one finds between Luther's arguments and the arguments of Bucer, Eck and Pfefferkorn on the socio-economic issues is striking. The attacks on what is perceived as the privileged status of Jews over against the common people (who also appear sometimes as “poor Germans”—although it should be noted that, not surprisingly, Pfefferkorn does not sound this note of ethnic concern) and the feelings of alienation over against the rulers, the nobility and the upper classes; the denunciations of Jewish usury, Jewish involvement in trade, and the insistence that Jews pose an economic (as well as a spiritual) danger; the proposal to force Jews into the most menial and unpleasant forms of physical labour; and the constant threat of expulsion—all of these are not unique to Luther, but are shared by all four authors we have surveyed. Indeed, given the dates of the anti-Jewish works we have examined, one wonders if Bucer, Eck and Luther were not strongly influenced by Pfefferkorn's prior development of these themes.

There is one final issue in Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies* that I want to raise: it is the charge of ritual murder. In the course of this treatise Luther raises the charges that

have been made against the Jews—ritual murder, desecration of the host, poisoning of the wells, etc.—and says he does not know whether the charges are true, but he adds that he does know “that they do not lack the complete, full, and ready will to do such things either secretly or openly where possible.”⁵⁰ Somewhat later on in the treatise Luther again brings up the same charges and says that the Jews “have been bloodthirsty bloodhounds and murderers of all Christendom for more than fourteen hundred years in their intentions and would undoubtedly prefer to be such with their deeds.” Luther then states the charges that have been laid against them and continues: “... for all of which they have often been condemned to death by fire.”⁵¹ Does he see them as condemned justly or unjustly? Luther does not say at this point, but a little later he drops all qualifying phrases and speaks out plainly:

So we are even at fault in not avenging all this innocent blood of our Lord and of the Christians which they shed for three hundred years after the destruction of Jerusalem, and the blood of the children they have shed since them (which shines forth from their eyes and their skin).⁵²

Here the charge of ritual murder is clearly laid. It is interesting to note that on this issue, the solidarity between the four authors is broken. In addition to Luther it is only Eck who picks up on the blood libel charges: indeed, he makes these charges the focus of his *Refutation of a Jew-Book*. Pfefferkorn, who I have suggested may be an important source for Luther's anti-Jewish invective, will have nothing to do with the ritual murder charges; in fact, he states that by continuing to believe and circulate these stories “we are making fools of ourselves and exposing the Christian faith to ridicule and contempt.”⁵³ If Luther is dependent on Pfefferkorn for many of his negative assessments of Jews, it is significant that he breaks rank with him at the one point where Pfefferkorn defends the Jews.

IV. Conclusion

To put the preceding presentation into perspective, it may be helpful to readers to show how the views presented here compare with another recent interpretation of this subject. The work I have chosen to discuss for the purposes of comparison is Heiko A. Oberman's *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age*

of *Renaissance and Reformation* which was published in Germany in 1981 and translated into English in 1984.⁵⁴ Oberman, "the reigning dean of Reformation studies",⁵⁵ brings to this work a lifetime of intensive study of the late medieval and Reformation periods. He states that his book originally began as a study of "Luther and the Jews" and expanded as he came to see that this topic would have to be set in the broader context of the whole age of the Renaissance and Reformation. Within this breadth of coverage there is also—as in Oberman's other writings—much depth and much to provoke reflection and discussion.

Given the breadth of the context within which Oberman places Luther, it is somewhat surprising to see how quickly and how exclusively he focuses in on one theme, namely, Luther's theology, as the key to understanding the topic of "Luther and the Jews". Oberman's contention is that Judaism for Luther represents "a principle of legalism"⁵⁶ and thus any attack that Luther makes on the Jews is really an attack on "theological misguidedness".⁵⁷ Commenting on Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Oberman writes: "Not desecration of the host, and not Jewish bloodthirstiness, but rather theological misguidedness is what Luther attacks as life-threatening."⁵⁸ On the one hand, this means that "the Jewish question" occupies "a central place in [Luther's] theology",⁵⁹ since it deals with the major issue of theological truth. On the other hand, however, one must recognize that the Jews are not important to Luther as Jews per se but rather as opponents of God who are not really different from any of the other of God's opponents—heretics, the pope, the Turks, etc.⁶⁰ To single out the Jews and to draw conclusions about Luther's understanding of the Jews mainly on the basis of his specifically anti-Jewish writings, therefore, "not only intolerably depletes the evidence, but actually preprograms it."⁶¹ Oberman's extensive work with the whole Luther corpus has convinced him that Luther's writings against the Jews, the pope and the Turks "belong to a single, indissoluble generic category: apocalyptic prophecy."⁶² Oberman understands Luther to be living in a state of intense apocalyptic expectation, and as Luther tries to read the signs of these end-times, he sees in the misery of the Jews not the fate of some alien group but rather a glimpse of "the condition of the church at the close of history".⁶³ Ultimately, Oberman

concludes that Luther's apocalyptic interpretation of the Jews moves him to a recognition of the "solidarity in sins shared by 'us wicked Christians' and the Jews."⁶⁴

What seems to me to be missing from Oberman's analysis is the broader socio-economic element. Oberman discusses in great depth Luther's theological anti-Judaism, and what he says about this is on target—except that he sees it as the whole picture. Although Oberman writes early on in the book of how "a multiplicity of motivations" was involved with those who hated Jews and those who protected them,⁶⁵ he soon narrows this down for Luther to a single "goal" which was "to reclaim the Scriptures in their entirety from the perversities they were suffering at the hands of Jews, whether through rabbinical or scholastic exegesis."⁶⁶ This reclamation of the Scriptures was "the motive that drove him to write against the Jews and 'their lies.'"⁶⁷

From my point of view such an interpretation leaves a great deal unaccounted for in Luther. It does not, for example, help one to understand why Luther does not only present the Jews as living in misery but also as living in luxury. This latter theme which comes up repeatedly in Luther's anti-Jewish writings does not figure in Oberman's account because the anger and resentment Luther expresses about Jews living in luxury obviously relates to the social and economic status of the Jews as Luther perceives it. Commenting on Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Oberman writes:

The harshness of this work does not, however, lie in warnings against the possible future crimes of individual persons, but in its unyielding stance toward Judaism as a whole, which Luther perceived as threatening Christians not with misdeeds but with falsehoods. That was why Luther had counselled the authorities to burn down the Jewish schools of deceit, the synagogues, to confiscate the rabbinical texts, or—if none of these measures helped—to expel those Jews who refused to convert.⁶⁸

Oberman's theological thrust is clear: Luther's treatise deals with "Judaism" (not Jews), and the threat Judaism poses is its dissemination of "falsehoods". What is missing from Oberman's account at this point is very important: Oberman is referring to a passage in Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies* in which Luther proposes eight distinct actions against the Jews, but what Oberman does here is to touch on five of these recommendations and omit reference to three others.⁶⁹ The three

he omits all deal very pointedly with socio-economic concerns and their impact on Luther's attitude toward the Jews: abolishing safe-conduct for Jews on the highways, prohibiting them from engaging in usury, and forcing them to engage in manual labour.

Oberman does not only omit these three points of Luther from his discussion at this point; as far as I can see they are never presented in the book. In general the socio-economic level of Luther's argumentation does not take its place alongside the theological level in Oberman's presentation, and in particular all eight points made by Luther in *On the Jews and Their Lies* do not get laid out in the book. Can one say that Luther's views on the Jews have been fully presented if three of his critical recommendations are not given at all and if all eight recommendations are nowhere discussed as at least one summary of Luther's views? Oberman has theoretically offered a valuable corrective on the topic of Luther and the Jews with his proposal that treatments of this topic should be based on all of Luther's writings and not just on the anti-Jewish treatises. The reality, however, seems to be that Oberman has gone so far in his revisionism that in his work the anti-Jewish treatises are not given their due—at least in terms of their socio-economic emphases—and thus Oberman has not overcome the one-sidedness he decries. He has just fallen off the other side of the horse.

I have tried to make the case that in order to understand Luther's views on the Jews one must take into account socio-economic considerations as well as purely theological ones. The emphasis on the socio-economic themes is offered as a corrective to those views that have stressed the theological component too heavily; I would not want to be interpreted as promoting a socio-economic view at the expense of theological understanding. In the final analysis I believe both elements shaped Luther—and his spirituality.

Notes

- 1 Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971.
- 2 Philadelphia: Temple University, 1978.
- 3 Heiko A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 72.
- 4 Robert Stupperich, *Martin Bucers Deutsche Schriften*, Vol. 7: *Schriften der Jahre 1538-1539* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd

- Mohn, 1964) 349; hereafter abbreviated as DS 7. The translations from this volume are my own.
- 5 DS 7:350.
 - 6 DS 7:350.
 - 7 DS 7:352.
 - 8 DS 7:352.
 - 9 DS 7:352-357.
 - 10 DS 7:352-353.
 - 11 DS 7:353-354.
 - 12 DS 7:354.
 - 13 DS 7:354.
 - 14 DS 7:355-356.
 - 15 DS 7:357.
 - 16 Thomas A. Brady, Jr., *Ruling Class, Regime and Reformation at Strasbourg, 1520-1555* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978) 238.
 - 17 Miriam Usher Chrisman, *Strasbourg and the Reform: A Study in the Process of Change* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) 129.
 - 18 DS 7:374.
 - 19 *Ains Judenbüechlins verlegung* (Ingolstadt: Alexander Weissenhorn, 1541); hereafter cited as *Verlegung*.
 - 20 *Verlegung X*. The translations of Eck's work are my own.
 - 21 See *Verlegung Xiiij* (b), a ij and a iij.
 - 22 *Verlegung Y iij* (c).
 - 23 *Verlegung Z-Z ij*.
 - 24 *Verlegung Z ij*.
 - 25 Pfefferkorn's first treatise was *Speculum adhortationis iudaice ad Christum* (Speyer: C. Hist, 1507). This discussion of Pfefferkorn, however, is based on two of his works: *Die juden peicht* (Nuremberg: Hans Weissenburger, 1508); hereafter cited as *Peicht*, and *Hostis judaeorum* (Cologne: Henricum de Nussia, 1509); hereafter cited as *Hostis*. The translations of these works are my own.
 - 26 *Peicht B iii* (v).
 - 27 *Peicht B iii* (v) - *B iiiii* (r).
 - 28 *Peicht B iiiii* (v).
 - 29 *Peicht B iiiii* (r).
 - 30 *Peicht B v* (r).
 - 31 *Peicht B v* (r).
 - 32 *Peicht B v* (v).
 - 33 *Peicht B v* (r).
 - 34 *Peicht B v* (r).
 - 35 *Peicht B vi* (r).
 - 36 *Hostis C iiiii* (r).
 - 37 Mark U. Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531-1546* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983) 139.

- 38 LW 47:62.
39 LW 47:62.
40 *Lies*, LW 47:137.
41 *Lies*, LW 47:138.
42 *Lies*, LW 47:139.
43 *Lies*, LW 47:140.
44 *Lies*, LW 47:217-218.
45 *Lies*, LW 47:272-273.
46 *Lies*, LW 47:270.
47 *Lies*, LW 47:268.
48 *Lies*, LW 47:268-272.
49 *Lies*, LW 47:272.
50 *Lies*, LW 47:217.
51 *Lies*, LW 47:264-265.
52 *Lies*, LW 47:267.
53 *Speculum*, fol. D 1 (v). Quoted in Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism*, 35.
54 The translator is James I. Porter; the publisher is Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA.
55 Steven Rowan, "Luther, Bucer and Eck on the Jews," *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 16/1 (1985) 79.
56 Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism*, 45.
57 *Ibid.* 72.
58 *Ibid.* 72.
59 *Ibid.* 94.
60 *Ibid.* 72.
61 *Ibid.* 103.
62 *Ibid.* 117.
63 *Ibid.* 103.
64 *Ibid.* 124.
65 *Ibid.* 14.
66 *Ibid.* 50.
67 *Ibid.* 50.
68 *Ibid.* 121.
69 See LW 47:270-272.