

The Wrath of a Disappointed Lover: On Luther's Attitude Toward the Jews

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Introduction

Martin Luther is one of the most influential thinkers in the history of the Christian Church. 500 years ago this year, he published his 95 theses on indulgence, which launched one of the most remarkable revival movements in European history. Understanding the causes and significance of the events surrounding the Reformation remains relevant even today, Luther shared the Renaissance fascination with historical sources, becoming one of the sixteenth century's leading Christian experts on the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. He had a keen interest in the people of the Bible as both historical and contemporary realities. The strange ambiguity in his writings on the Jews has made the topic "Luther and the Jews" a controversial and hotly debated issue, however.¹ At the same time as exhibiting a respectful tolerance toward the Jewish people, he also shamelessly vilifies them, denigrating them with such a vehemence and rhetorical force that the Nazis enlisted him in support of their extreme anti-Semitism.

Is Luther's thinking concerning the Jews systematic? Or is he a Christian equally confused and angered by the consistent Jewish rejection of the gospel of Christ so that his writings on this topic are nothing but a haphazard collection of incoherent thoughts? This question is exacerbated by Luther's position within German, European, and ecclesiastical history. His personality looms large, even contemporary discussions of the relation between Jews and the more or less secularized Christian West, including the political issues of the Middle East, are colored by our understanding of Luther's position in relation to the Jews.

In the following, I shall address Luther's most important writings on this topic in their historical context. How did Luther's predecessors and contemporaries view the Jews and what are the main characteristics of his early approach? What caused the apparent shift in his position? Did Luther's theological evaluation of the Jewish people change or do the strict measures against the Jews he promoted in his later years derive from other factors? Despite being aware of how our approach to this particular part of our past is shaped by more recent history, I shall not go beyond a discussion of the historical sources.²

¹ For a representative sample of the literature, see Ingemar Öberg, *Luther and World Mission: A Historical and Systematic Study*, trans. Dean Apel (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 326–34; Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism: Against his Better Judgement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 120–37; Thomas Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Richard Harvey, *Luther and the Jews: Putting Right the Dark Side of Luther's Legacy* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2017).

² In the German context, the pursuit of a historical understanding is very easily perceived as a form of excuse, the Luther inheritance forming part of a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions: see Matthias Morgenstern, "Erwägungen zu einem Dokument der Schande," in

Historical Background

In the early-medieval period, the European Church was relatively tolerant toward the Jews. Pope Gregory (in office between 590 and 604) defended religious freedom for Jews and their right to synagogue worship, maintaining that all human beings shared the responsibility for Jesus' death.³ This changed with the Crusades, however. Although primarily directed against the Moslems, even the Jews came under attack during this period. The fourth Lateran Council in 1215 decreed that Moslems and Jews living in Europe should wear special clothes to avoid contact with Christians. Church authorities and laypeople alike vilified the Jews as exclusively responsible for killing Jesus, stereotyped accusations becoming common: Jews killed Christian children and drank their blood, stole the Eucharistic bread for the sake of performing blasphemous rites, and caused the Black Death in 1348.⁴

The late-medieval period saw the power of the Church threatened by the rise of national and local authorities. Jews were one of the primary victims of this development, to the extent that they were expelled from England, France, and Spain. In Italy and Germany, however, they remained an important cultural force, the Renaissance interest in the literary works of antiquity—including the Bible—drawing Jews and Christian scholars interested in studying the Hebrew language together.⁵ This formed the background for the so-called Pfefferkorn controversy in Germany. A Jew who converted to Christianity in 1504 and then became a Jewish missionary, Pfefferkorn recommended the burning of all Jewish books (apart from the Bible). Universities sceptical of the literary ideals of Renaissance humanism supported this measure, which in time came to serve as a vehicle for criticizing Christian scholars interested in Jewish culture and the Hebrew language. The main target of this critique was Johannes Reuchlin, the leading Christian Hebraist of the time and grand-uncle of the later Greek professor at the University of Wittenberg, Philipp Melanchthon.⁶

Asked for his opinion regarding the matter, Luther—at this time (1514) a scholar familiar with Renaissance philology serving as Professor of biblical exegesis at Wittenberg—unambivalently sided with Reuchlin and the Christian Hebraists, believing the burning of books to be an unacceptable missiological strategy.⁷ The Pope not sharing this opinion, he condemned Reuchlin to silence in 1520, due in part to anti-Judaism and in part to anti-humanism—biblical philology having become an important element in the theological renewal being advocated by the Wittenberg Bible Professor.⁸

Luther's later great opponent, Erasmus of Rotterdam, leader of the German Renaissance humanists, had no sympathy for the opponents of Reuchlin. His defense of Reuchlin is nevertheless tainted with a strong anti-Jewish sentiment of which there is no trace in Luther. Erasmus maintains that

Luther, Von den Juden und ihren Lügen, ed. Matthias Morgenstern (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2016), 251–76, 253.

³ Vidar Haanes, "Antisemittisme i humanismens tidsalder," *Tidsskrift for teologi og kirke* 76 (2005), 26–45, 27.

⁴ Ibid, 28; Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism*, 18–22.

⁵ Haanes, "Antisemittisme i humanismens tidsalder," 29.

⁶ Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism*, 23–24.

⁷ Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 336.

⁸ Haanes, "Antisemittisme i humanismens tidsalder," 30–33.

as a former Jew, Pfefferkorn could not be considered trustworthy, his advice thus being inapposite. Differing from Reuchlin and Luther, Erasmus—who never learned Hebrew—exhibited no interest in Jewish philology as a tool for exegeting the Christian Bible.⁹

Luther's Hope for the Conversion of the Jews

Luther started his academic career by lecturing on the Psalms (1513–1515). While he criticizes the Jews for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah herein, he does not adopt the common anti-Jewish stereotypes of his day or hold the Jews responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. Although he is aware of and comments on the hope for their eschatological conversion in Rom 11:23–26, he seems to regard this as referring to the conversion of a small remnant.¹⁰

In his lectures on Romans (1515–1516), Luther condemns the Jews for trusting in their election and obedience to the law. This is, however, not a sin peculiar to the Jews; in Luther's view (and arguably also Paul's), those who do not believe in justification in Christ disregard the divine plan for salvation and trust their own works. In this respect, Luther makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. This principle remains a central element in Luther's evaluation of the Jews: in rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, they demonstrate greater trust in their own ideas about God and His election more than in the realities of divine revelation.

Luther nevertheless accepts Paul's teaching that the election of the Jews stands firm, albeit not as an election to salvation independent of belief in Christ. Reading Rom 11:23–26 as alluding to eschatological conversion, he does not insist that it applies to all individuals past and present.¹¹ Not believing that the Church replaces Israel, however, he considers the task of preaching to the Jews important, citing Paul's attitude in Rom 9:1–5 as an example. Christians should therefore avoid cursing and slandering the Jews.¹²

The Reformation breakthrough gave Luther new hope for the conversion of the Jews. As the chosen people of God, Luther contends they are to be given the opportunity to hear the gospel in a way that appeals to them. Christians must therefore address them with humility and prayer, avoiding prompting them to wrath and irritation. In his commentary on the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55)—which ends with Mary's reminder to God of His faithfulness toward Israel based on his promises to Abraham—written while in Wartburg in 1521, Luther maintains that through Christ this is a promise for the entire world. Still constituting the foundation of the hope for the conversion of the Jews, however, Christians must avoid behaving in ways that counteract the fulfillment of this hope in their dealings with the Jews.¹³

In 1523, Luther published the first writing he devoted entirely to the Jews. Entitled *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, it was prompted by accusations

⁹ Haanes, "Antisemitisme i humanismens tidsalder," 35–36; Thomas Kaufmann, *Luthers "Judenschriften": Ein Beitrag zu ihrer historischen Kontextualisierung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 180–81; Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism*, 24.

¹⁰ Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 336–37; Kaufmann, *Luthers Juden*, 49–50.

¹¹ See Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 338–39; Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism*, 38–42.

¹² Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 339–40.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 340–45.

that he rejected the virgin birth and Mary's status as *semper virgo*.¹⁴ Encountering no difficulties in refuting the accusation, he then proceeds to discuss the fact that Jews may be reluctant to accept the story of the virgin birth with its implied understanding of Jesus as the Son of God. In preaching to the Jews, one should therefore avoid starting with this issue, rather focusing on Jesus' Jewishness as portrayed in the Gospels. The ability to evince that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Messianic prophecies of the Hebrew Bible nevertheless remains important. In this context, Luther discusses the passages he finds the most relevant—Gen 49:10 and Dan 9:24–27—seeking to refute the rabbinic interpretation of these texts. In his view, the date of the coming of the Messiah could not be endlessly postponed, extending to a period long after the Jews had been dispersed from the Promised Land.¹⁵ He does not criticize Jews for righteousness based on works, however.

This work demonstrates Luther's awareness of the problems of contextualization and the need to address the Jews respectfully, politely, and competently. The booklet was received very favourably by the Jewish communities.¹⁶ He nonetheless has no doubt that Jesus is the only way of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles. His critique of Christian harshness toward the Jews is motivated by his missiological agenda, exhibiting no traces of a "two ways" theology. While Jesus is the only Savior, Luther acknowledges and highlights Paul's statement that the Gospel is "to the Jew first" (Rom 1:16).

As is well known, Luther's expectations that the Jews would convert *en masse* were not fulfilled. His writings from the latter half of the 1520s and 1530s are pervaded by a critical tone—in part theological, emphasizing the Jews' blindness and stubbornness in their rejection of the message of the prophets and Jesus as the Messiah, and in part populist, accusing them of usury and greed. He does not target the Jews specifically, however, often classifying them—together with Turks, Gentiles, and false Christians (papists and enthusiasts)—as those far from God's grace. He also draws a parallel between papist and rabbinic biblical interpretation, regarding both as attempts to avoid facing the core of the biblical revelation.¹⁷ Although not totally despairing of the conversion of the Jews or other opponents of the gospel, he is considerably more pessimistic of the salvation of the former here than in *That Christ Was Born a Jew*.¹⁸

In the 1530s, the legal status of the Jews was an issue of debate in Germany. Luther maintained that they should be tolerated as long as they did not publicly voice their blasphemous religious opinions.¹⁹ While this view differs sharply from the modern concept of religious freedom, during this period politicians and intellectuals believed political stability to be dependent upon

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlaus, 1883–1990) (WA), 11:314–36 = Martin Luther, *Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958–1967), 45:199–229 (LW). For good summaries of the content, see Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 349–59; Kaufmann, *Luthers Juden*, 67–73; for the historical context, see also idem, *Luthers "Judenschriften"*, 13–42.

¹⁵ Luther interprets Gen 49:10 as stating that Judah will be a sovereign country until the Messiah comes: see Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 354.

¹⁶ Haanes, "Antisemitisme i humanismens tidsalder," 37.

¹⁷ Kaufmann, *Luthers Juden*, 37.

¹⁸ Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 359–66.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 366.

religious unity. During the 1520s and 1530s, Luther was thus more tolerant than many of his contemporaries—befitting a figure condemned by ecclesial and political authorities alike for his theological convictions.

Rather than waiting quietly for the occasional polite Christian missionary to turn up, seeking to convert them, members of the Jewish community became increasingly self-confident, at times quite successfully promoting the Jewish religion among Christians.²⁰ In 1537, the spokesperson for the Jews in Germany, Josel von Rosheim, asked Luther to plead their case before the Prince of Saxony. While the Jews appear not to have forgotten Luther's exhortations for tolerance, he himself appears to have done so. Despite replying politely—addressing Rosheim as “my dear Josel”—he declines the request on the grounds that the Jews have exploited Christian goodwill and tolerance for proselytizing purposes and perpetually reject God's revelation. Just as they opposed the prophets during the biblical period, they have now been rejecting Christ and his representatives for 1500 years.²¹

Luther's Anti-Jewish Polemics

In 1538, Luther was asked to publish his theological objections against the Jews as a counter-strategy to their proselytizing efforts. This gave rise to the tract *Against the Sabbatarians*.²² Herein, Luther interprets the Jews' existence without the Temple, priests, and a king for 1500 years as divine punishment, asserting that they should ask themselves what they have done to incur God's wrath. Although the Sages maintained that the cause was their worship of the golden calf, Luther begged to differ, arguing that God had kept His promise and led them to the Promised Land despite their idolatry in the desert (66–69), also promising them a new covenant (Jer 31:31–34). A good reason must exist to explain why this, as they themselves believe, has not been fulfilled (69–70). In biblical times, divine punishment was always followed by divine blessings. The blessings having been absent for 1500 years, the logical conclusion must be that the Jews are under God's wrath because of what they did 1500 years ago when they rejected Jesus as the Messiah (70–78).

Luther does not contend that the Jews are being punished by God because they crucified Jesus, however, always associating their status with their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. While the validity of this as an adequate starting point for an evaluation of Judaism is disputable, the vast majority of the Jewish people have in fact rejected Jesus as Messiah.

In this tract, Luther also addresses the question of the eternity of the Torah. While the Sages interpret Deut 18:15 as teaching that the time of the Law will end when the Messiah comes, by Luther's day the Temple had been destroyed and the cultus not practiced for 1500 years. Even the Jews must thus acknowledge that the time of the law has come to an end and been replaced by the time of the Messiah (79–80). God is eternal—not biblical law (82).

While Luther undoubtedly addresses the Jews far more polemically in *Against the Sabbatarians* than in *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, the latter nonetheless also remains within the bounds of theological argumentation. Although his desire to avoid antagonizing the Jews and his hope of winning

²⁰ Ibid, 367.

²¹ See *WA Briefwechsel*, 8:89–90; Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 371.

²² *WA* 50:312–37; *LW* 47:65–98; Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 373–81.

them over are clearer in Luther's earlier work, both are the work of a theologian and biblical scholar defending his Christ-centered interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and seeking to convince his readers of its validity and cogency.

In 1542, a Jewish refutation of *Against the Sabbatarians* was published, prompting Luther's now (in)famous *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543).²³ Here, while Luther still believes the Jews to be God's chosen people, he is also convinced that their sin and disbelief mean that they lie under His wrath like the Gentiles. The fact that they are the descendants of Abraham is of no help to them any longer (140–76). On the contrary, they must be considered God's opponents, who can only be met with the power of the word of God—i.e., the fact that the Messianic promises are fulfilled in Christ and therefore cannot refer to Jewish history. Luther defends his view that Gen 49:10 is incompatible with the 1500 years of diaspora (178–96), also exegeting 2 Sam 7:5–12, 23:2–5, Psalm 89, Jer 33:17–26, Hag 2:7–10, and his earlier understanding of Dan 9:24–27 (196–254).²⁴ Rather than following the strategy Jesus adopts in Matthew 11, where he insists that his *modus operandi* corresponds to the Messianic pattern, Luther's interest lies in refuting the Jewish claim that the Messianic promises will be fulfilled in another who is yet to appear. For Luther, this is incompatible with what we know of the history of the Jews and the more than 1500 years that have passed since they governed themselves in their own country.²⁵

Luther regards the Jewish claim that the Christian doctrines of the trinity and incarnation are incompatible with the monotheism of the Hebrew Bible as bordering on blasphemy, the Jews surely knowing that the confession of divine unity in Deut 6:4 is as central for Christians as for Jews (289). In their polemics against Christians, however, the Jews went beyond these assertions, calling Jesus a magician and Mary a whore (256–60).²⁶ He refers to the curse against Christians in the Jewish Sabbath liturgy (264), but while adducing the accusations that Jews have poisoned wells and kidnapped children, does not insist that these are true (264). He is also critical of Jews who earn their living by usury (270).²⁷

For Luther, Jewish slandering of Christians is a sure sign that the Jews lie under God's wrath (291), such activity constituting a form of blasphemy that

²³ WA 53:417–552. The German text has recently been re-edited as Martin Luther, *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen: Neu bearbeitet und kommentiert von Matthias Morgenstern* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2016) = LW 47:137–306 (page numbers in the following refer to the English edition). Öberg (*Luther and World Mission*, 382–420) provides both a summary and an extensive discussion of many of the issues related to this book. For a shorter summary, see also Kaufmann, *Luthers Juden*, 124–34.

²⁴ The interpretation of 2 Samuel 23 is also the topic of Luther's last polemical writing against the Jews, *On the Last Words of David* (WA 54:28–100): see Kaufmann, *Luthers Juden*, 136.

²⁵ Morgenstern ("Erwägungen," 261) draws attention to the fact that Luther interprets the Bible here as a polemics against others rather than as a liberating gospel.

²⁶ For the primary sources relating to Jewish slandering of Christians, see Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 401; Luther, *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen*, nn. 729, 744, 756. According to Morgenstern ("Erwägungen," 259), however, Luther gives these quotations a significance they may not bear in their original context.

²⁷ Luther has *Birkat haminin* in mind here, a "benediction" for the destruction of heretics. According to Morgenstern (Luther, *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen*, 188 n. 779), however, this belongs to a part of the *Amidah*/Eighteen Benedictions not recited on the Sabbath.

should not be tolerated in a Christian country. He thus advocates that Christian princes expel the Jews from their lands and their synagogues treated in the way the prophets recommended in relation to idolatrous temples— i.e., burned “in honor of our Lord and of Christendom.”²⁸ If they do not distance themselves from the sins of the Jews in this way, Christians may themselves be burdened with the guilt induced by these sins (268). While he also maintains that Rabbis should not be allowed to teach and Jews in general to travel (269), he does not seek to suppress their religious activities *per se*. In fact, in some ways he is a precursor of the Christian Zionist movement, recommending that they move to the land of their ancestors where they can worship freely without burdening Christians with their lies and blasphemy (288).

The primary purpose of *On the Jews and Their Lies* is to preach the Gospel and convince the Jews of Jesus’ messiahship, however. Here, his argument closely resembles that in *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, even if “polemic and severity have a tendency to bubble up between the positive statements.”²⁹ Although he has few expectations of success, as a Christian preacher he cannot but proclaim Jesus as the manifestation of divine grace and Savior of all, both Jews and Gentiles. He concludes with a prayer for the conversion of the Jews directed to the only one who has the power to fulfil it: “May Christ, our dear Lord, convert them mercifully and preserve us steadfastly and immovably in the knowledge of him, which is eternal life. Amen” (306).

On the Jews and Their Lies is generally regarded as the most problematic of Luther’s books concerning the Jews. This is due both to its theological argumentation and the extent to which Luther makes use of anti-Jewish stereotypes. In my view, the principal difficulty it poses is not Luther’s defense of a Christian and Christocentric reading of the Hebrew Bible or his prayer for the conversion of the Jews—principles adopted by the apostles and thus par for the course for a Christian theologian and church leader—but the fact that he does not appeal to the sanction of the divine word and the authority it provides to demand that fellow human beings also obey it. He rather claims to know that the word of God condemns others—in such a way as to let himself and his fellow Christians off the hook. Departing from the law/gospel hermeneutics of a theologian of the cross, he thus allows himself the liberty of propagating a rather heavy dose of “theology of glory.” For all his heavy-handed polemics, Luther usually avoids this by showing at least some awareness of the hypocrisy Jesus refers to in the parable of the mote in one’s eye (Matt 7:3). Much of what he writes in *On the Jews and Their Lies* ignores this axiom. The book is devoted to the divine condemnation of the Jews rather than the law-gospel dialectic with respect to humanity—including the Jews. This fact is exacerbated by Luther’s relaxing of his customary strict documentation of what he attacks. The result is both merciless and indefensible.

A few months after the publication of *On the Jews and Their Lies*, the smaller tract *On the Tetragrammaton and the Generations of Christ* saw the light of day.³⁰ Luther is very critical of Jewish speculations concerning the name of God and its Hebrew renderings, which, once again, he interprets as a sign

²⁸ “... unserm Herrn und der Christenheit zu ehren” (WA 53:523).

²⁹ Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 413.

³⁰ WA 53:579–648. To the best of my knowledge, no English translation of this work exists. Page numbers in the following refer to the WA edition.

that the Jews lie under God's wrath (600–609).³¹ In the second part, Luther addresses the Jewish claim that Mary was not a descendant of David. The New Testament solves this problem by stating that Mary's betrothal and marriage with Joseph mean that her son belongs to the house of David. The genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 thus follow Joseph's lineage. Not satisfied with this answer, Luther claims that Rom 1:3 together with Gal 4:4 attests to Mary's Davidic ancestry as well (612). Here, he thus returns to his earlier practice of refuting Jewish claims on the basis of biblical exegesis. While he makes no recommendations for harsh political measures against the Jews, this work is rife with polemical slander.³²

Luther and the Jews: A Critical Assessment

The Christian Church has a long history of anti-Jewish polemics. While Luther undoubtedly forms part of this tradition, assessing his precise place in it is not an easy task.³³ The fact that his writings were adduced by the proponents of the worst ethnocide against Jews ever committed inextricably links his name with the Holocaust. Neither the grounds of his criticism of the Jews nor the measures he recommended employing against them bear the slightest resemblance to the atrocities committed by the Nazis, however.³⁴ The events of the twentieth century must thus be excluded from any historical evaluation of his position.³⁵ He nevertheless mixes theologically relevant arguments with polemical slander in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish the wheat from the chaff—as is also true of his writings against papists, enthusiasts, and Turks. Luther does not always conform to his own advice in the Catechism, where he tells us to “interpret everything they [our neighbours] do in the best possible light.”³⁶

If we “turn the other cheek” and seek to give him the benefit of the doubt, can we assess his complicated relationship with the Jews in a way that is both fair and strict? Hardly any doubt exists that Luther's main objection against the Jews is the fact that they did not accept Jesus as Messiah. For Luther, Jesus' messiahship and the perception of the story of his life, death and resurrection as the revelation of divine grace is the key to the understanding of God, the world, and human beings. The central tenet of the Christian faith as proclaimed by the New Testament and Christian creedal statements, Luther put his extensive biblical scholarship to work in defending and maintaining this position against Jewish exegetical traditions. The consistent Jewish rejection of this faith

³¹ Morgenstern (“Erwägungen,” 263–64) suggests that Luther's reflections on the Tetragrammaton are influenced by rabbinic discussions. This is certainly a possibility as far as Luther's philological competence is concerned.

³² Kaufmann (*Luthers Juden*, 134) refers to this as “die wüteste and sprachlich schmutzigste Schrift, die Luther je geschrieben [hat]” (the worst and linguistically dirtiest thing Luther ever wrote).

³³ Oversimplifications such as “Luther's anti-Semitism” (cf. Gritsch) or “Luther's anti-Judaism” should thus be avoided.

³⁴ As Kaufmann (*Luthers Juden*, 12) demonstrates, the Nazi compilations of anti-Semitic quotations from Luther's works evince absolutely no understanding of what Luther actually seeks to say. The same is true of the Norwegian Nazi translation of *On the Jews and Their Lies*.

³⁵ See the objection to this argument in n. 2, however.

³⁶ See Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 353; Morgenstern, “Erwägungen,” 260.

both saddened and angered him, causing him to oscillate between finding it a challenge to Christian witness and a sign that the Jews lie under the wrath of God. The former point of view led him to champion a compassion and understanding for the need for contextualization that compares favourably with the attitude exhibited by most of his contemporaries, also giving the Jews of his day cause for gratitude. At the same time, however, he believed that this view entitled him to add his own invectives, not pausing to reflect on the fact that if the Jews were indeed under divine wrath his personal judgment was irrelevant. At times, he thus allowed himself to dip his pen into the deep well of unfounded traditional anti-Jewish sentiments.

The theological problem was compounded by political issues. In this context, Luther's view is predicated upon the concept of *corpus Christianorum*, according which the existence of another faith within Christendom is an anomaly that can only be tolerated as long as the Christian faith is not openly challenged. This principle is a general one, applying not only to the Jews but also to Christians who refused to learn the Catechism.³⁷ To measure this attitude by the yardstick of modern religious pluralism is anachronistic; Luther did not live in a liberal democracy and would not have understood the concept. He nevertheless upheld the axiom that force is inappropriate in matters of faith—whether the target is a lazy Christian or unbelieving Jew. Although this fact does not justify the harshness of the measures he recommends in *On the Jews and Their Lies*, it may help us understand some of the reasons behind it.

In the early 1520s, Luther was optimistic that the gospel would prevail and Christendom would be renewed. Just as Rome's walls were crumbling, so the Jewish ones might follow suit. This stance allowed him to earnestly hope for their conversion, inspired by Paul's zeal for his fellow Jews in Romans. The Jews resisted both his missiological approach and his exegetical arguments, however, meeting Christians with slanderous polemics of their own. Maintaining his theological convictions, his zeal for their conversion gave way to an anger over their stubbornness that was at variance with some of his most deeply-held theological convictions.³⁸ Never one to hide his lamp under a basket, he gave voice to this position with a venom that today may send a chill down the spine of even the most hardened of his readers.

Even the great reformer himself was thus dependent on salvation by grace, his attitude toward the Jews certainly not bringing him any merit of his own or in Christ.

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³⁷ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 348–49.

³⁸ For the consistency in Luther's attitude toward the Jews, see Kaufmann, *Luthers "Judenschriften,"* 128.