

## Luther and the Jews

An Exposition Directed to Christians on Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism, Defense, and  
Legacy

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of the historical relations between reformer Martin Luther and the Jewish people. Its primary purpose is to defend Luther's image as a prominent figure in Christian history while considering the possibility of his anti-Semitic views. This thesis focuses particularly on a number of Luther's written works in order to achieve this goal, with a secondary concentration on historical and incidental defenses that can be used to exonerate him. This thesis also serves to inform contemporary Christians of the controversy surrounding these views and the result of his legacy in more recent centuries.

## Luther and the Jews

### An Exposition Directed to Christians on Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism, Defense, and Legacy

In the history of Christianity, few leaders did more for the development of the modern church than Martin Luther. He was the crucial figure in the introduction of the Protestant Reformation, even translating the entire Bible into vernacular German. He composed a number of well-written theological treatises which have challenged and inspired Christians for centuries—the most significant of which is his *Ninety-Five Theses*. The modern Lutheran denomination is now based on his theology and ecclesiastical heritage. Any who have studied the history of the church know of Luther and the many battles he fought for the sake of Christ.

Because of Luther's achievements, his strong Christian views, and the impeccable public image that most lay Christians associate with him, it might surprise many to hear that he expressed undeniably anti-Semitic views in his written words. Luther has been frequently—and justifiably—criticized for these views, especially by those who seek to prove the corruption of the Christian church and of the European tradition as a whole (Rowan 80). Luther's expression of his anti-Semitic views certainly makes maintaining and defending his image and legacy a somewhat impossible task, though one not completely without hope.

Luther formed anti-Semitic views gradually throughout his lifetime as he struggled with the issue of reconciling the beliefs of contemporary Jews with Protestant Christianity. Though he had very little face-to-face interaction with the Jewish people himself in his early life, he was highly involved in the discussion about the nature of the

Jewish people as a result of the contemporary controversy regarding their status in society as well as his own theology (Levy 437, Durant 727). Luther believed that with the coming of Christ, the church became the heir to God's covenant, replacing the Jewish people completely as God's chosen people (520). The Jews then needed to become Christians in order to gain salvation. His sentiments on the Jewish people can be divided into three general time periods: one of positivity, one of middling criticism, and one of pessimism and venomous critique. The worsening of Luther's tone over time is shown in Figure 1 by the general increase in "highly polemical treatises" (Edwards 7).



Fig.1. Highly polemical treatises (two-year intervals): (Edwards 7).

Luther's shift in tone could, admittedly, have been mitigated by each work's specific context. However, evaluating Luther's words solely on their exhibited content is a necessary beginning in understanding Luther's anti-Semitic thought.

### Luther's Words and Works

Luther's Relevant Works	
Work	Year Written/Published
"Letter to George Spalatin"	1514
<i>Concerning Christian Liberty (Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen)</i>	1520
<i>That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew</i>	1523
<i>Against the Sabbatarians</i>	1538
<i>On the Jews and their Lies</i>	1543
<i>Of the Unknowable Name and the Generations of Christ (Vom Schem Hamphoras und vom Geschlecht Christi)</i>	1543
<i>Warning against the Jews</i>	1546

During the first period of Luther's life, he was optimistic about the possibility of the conversion of the Jewish people and in his written works encouraged Christians toward love for them. Luther's position was only theologically critical at this point, and did not involve personal slights or severe language. Luther stated in 1514 when he was thirty-one years old—in his first known comment about the Jewish people—that the "conversion of the Jews will be the work of God alone operating from within" ("Letter to George Spalatin"). This statement displays a sort of exasperated attitude toward the Jewish people, but is still optimistic as a whole. Five years later, Luther specifically wrote that "absurd theologians defend hatred for the Jews. . . . What Jew would consent to enter our ranks when he sees the cruelty and enmity we wreak on them—that in our behavior toward them we less resemble Christians than beasts?" (qtd. in Rosenberg 65). Here Luther clearly shows that he is on the side of the Jewish people and that to mistreat them is to be poor witnesses for Christ.

Luther continued to show understanding for the Jewish people in his essay *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, which was published in 1523 when he was around forty years old. Here he expressly condemns other Christians' widespread persecution of the

Jewish people as a racial group in a tone very similar to his earlier statements. He declares, “If we really want to help them, we must be guided in our dealings with them not by papal law but by the law of Christian love” (qtd. in Gritsch 65). Treating the Jewish people kindly instead of persecuting them because of their race would be the first step in their salvation. Luther next rationally refutes contemporary Judaic theology to demonstrate that they desperately needed the evangelical help of the Christians (Martin 333). Luther also discusses his belief that the Jewish peoples’ previous failure to convert to Christianity is the fault of the dishonest Catholic Church (Levy 520), thereby laying some of the blame for their waywardness at the feet of his established foe. Quite memorably, Luther says, “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” (qtd. in *Martin Luther, the Bible* 78). He still acknowledges, though, that Christians are no more perfect in spiritual matters than the Jewish people are (qtd. in Probst). Luther’s overall beliefs in this first period of his life appear to show a relatively healthy view of the Jewish people as well as an understanding that the exemplary behavior shown by other Christians, supported by the grace of God, could indeed lead them to salvation and justification.

However, some critics disagree with this positive interpretation of even Luther’s earliest discussions about the Jewish people. Dr. Andreas Pangritz of the University of Bonn claims that a close reading of Luther’s work will show his anti-Semitic views as early as 1523 (604), the year in which he actually published *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*. Luther does indeed slightly foreshadow the man he would eventually become:

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. (qtd. in *Martin Luther, The Bible* 82)

In this passage, Luther demonstrates that he believed eventually treating the Jewish people badly *could* be necessary. Although it appears Luther did have underlying contradictory emotions regarding the Jewish people at that point, his tone *was* civil and appropriate enough for a theological discussion.

What is certain is that as Luther grew older, his works dealing with the Jewish people grew more unforgiving. In this so-called second portion of his life, he began to despair of the stubborn Jews ever converting to Christianity (Levy 520). This shift likely came about for a number of reasons. In the 1530s, rumors spread of Christian accommodations of Jewish practices and conversions to Judaism, which “sen[t] Luther into a rage” (Rowan 88). Luther’s relations with Jewish leader Josel of Rosheim grew more tense simultaneously (88). Luther also wrote about one specific event which may have triggered this change in his views on the Jewish people. He had written a letter of recommendation that would enable a group of Jewish scholars to travel safely on the German highways, but he later heard that they had “insulted Christ” while doing so (Martin 336). Luther referenced this event when he later wrote, “Therefore I do not wish to have anything more to do with any Jew. . . the more one tries to help them the baser and more stubborn they become” (*On the Jews and their Lies*).



Luther's words—and indeed his actions as well—began to worsen. It is reported that Luther had had Jews expelled from Saxony in 1537 (Dacy 3). His next pertinent written work was 1538's *Against the Sabbatarians*—referring to the Jewish observation of Sabbath. Although as a whole the letter discusses reasonable, theologically-based complaints against the Jewish people such as he had made before, he also devolves into defamation slightly, saying they “[were] given to babbling and lying” (qtd. in Probst). These words are nothing compared to the excoriating tone of his even later works, though.

In the third period of his life, Luther published works that harshly attacked the Jewish people and were stripped of his former optimistic tone. He also had many more Jews expelled from German towns during the 1540s (qtd. in Dacy 3). He turned against the Jewish people in both his theological and pragmatic considerations, believing that his words were justified as the result of his theology regarding the Jews' status as a rejected people as well as the contemporary Jews' refusal to convert to Christianity (Edwards 140).

His 65,000-word work *On the Jews and their Lies* from 1543—three years before his death—is the most significant and harsh of his later works. In this treatise, Luther first denounces the Jewish people's “false boasts” (*On the Jews*). He notes that the Jews are no longer the people of God and says that they have no possibility of becoming so. He states, “Much less do I propose to convert the Jews, for that is impossible.” He also insists that the Jews are a “base, whoring people, that is, no people of God, and their boast of lineage, circumcision, and law must be accounted as filth.” He calls the synagogue an “incorrigible whore and an evil slut.” In another part of the treatise, Luther

provides theological exegesis of Scripture to support his ideas. He upbraids the Jewish people for their unfounded arrogance founded in the rites of circumcision, the Law given by Moses, and of the building of the temple in Jerusalem.

Finally, in what is certainly the most infamous portion of the treatise, Luther very specifically discusses the practical considerations of his beliefs, giving advice to the Christians on how to treat the Jewish people who lived in their country (*On the Jews*). Luther begins this portion with a long rant asserting that the Jewish people blatantly steal from the poor German people through their trade of usury, but he then moves to the essence of the matter. Luther strongly recommends that the German people set fire to the Jewish people's synagogues and homes, seize their property and religious writings, ban rabbis from teaching under threat of execution, abolish the Jewish people's safe travel on the highways, ban them from practicing the trade of usury, seize their gold and silver, commit them to menial labor, and otherwise drive them out of the country.

Luther was wary of the tendency of some Reformers to dabble in Judaic practices (Durant 726). Religious leaders such as Zwingli, who "found himself enchanted by the Hebrew language," were accused of "Judaizing" (726). Luther hoped that his recommendations would cause the Jewish people to flee the country and never come back as a result of their destroyed possessions (Oberman 295). That way, they would never be able to seduce Christians with their lies and cause them to convert to Judaism (Oberman 295). These actions would also show God that the Christians did not tolerate the blasphemy of the Jewish people. Despite the good Luther meant accomplish with his words, *On the Jews and Their Lies* appears to show the very worst of Luther's anti-Semitic thought.

Luther also wrote two more minor works in this later period which dealt with the Jewish people. One is *Of the Unknowable Name and the Generations of Christ*, which was essentially published as an appendix to *On the Jews and Their Lies* in 1543 (Edwards 131). In this work, Luther further mixes theological concepts with vulgar and scatological language directed at the Jewish people (Michael 134). Luther's very last sermon before his death in 1546, *Warning against the Jews*, condemns all Jews who do not convert to Christianity, claiming to the German people that "if they could kill us all, they would gladly do so" (*Luther's Last Sermon* 64).

### **Luther's Legacy**

Of great importance is the effect that Luther's anti-Semitic words have had upon others and the manner in which they determine how his life and works are remembered. As Luther's words only reinforced anti-Semitic ideas and laws already existent in society (Gritsch 77-78), they never had the same revolutionary effect as his earlier works which attacked the Catholic church. Luther's words had a much more limited effect upon the population than one might expect of those borne from the mouth of one of Germany's greatest religious leaders (Wallmann 72-78). Direct results of his words did include an increase in anti-Semitic sentiments in Lutheran communities (Levy 520), the expelling of the Jewish people from Saxony and Brandenburg (Durant 727), more restrictions being placed on Jews by the German government (Edwards 135-136), and the use of his sermons by a single local German pastor to advocate for the murder of Jews (Michael 117). The direct fallout of Luther's works could have been much worse had he introduced them at a different time, but his words still "set the tone in Germany for centuries, and prepared its people for genocidal holocausts" (Durant 727).

The Holocaust of World War II is without a doubt the most notorious event related to Luther's anti-Semitic works. Many of the persecutions enacted during the war directly correspond to suggestions that Luther made regarding the treatment of the Jewish people during the sixteenth century. Prominent Nazi officials cited Luther's words as justification for their actions, including the use of concentration camps and murder to subdue the Jewish people. It is also said that Luther "employed a coarseness and brutality of language unequalled in German history until the Nazi time" (Shirer 327). Hitler's education minister Bernhard Rust claimed that Hitler and Luther were cut from the same cloth (Steigmann-Gall 136-137). Julius Streicher, editor of the Nazi newspaper *Der Sturmer*, said during his trial for war crimes after the end of World War II that Luther with his tract *On the Jews and Their Lies* would certainly have been on the defendant's side had he been there (Paras 8). Hitler himself credited Luther as one of his greatest inspirations both in his book *Mein Kampf* and in one of his public speeches (7).

However, there is much debate among scholars as to whether or not Luther's works actually caused anti-Semitic events in Germany to occur or whether his works were simply used opportunistically. It is ultimately impossible to tell how much Luther influenced Nazi practices or beliefs, though Gordon Rupp notes that the Nazis use of Luther's name "proves no more than the fact that [the Nazis] also numbered Almighty God among their supporters" (84). The correlation of his works to the events of World War II then does not necessarily indicate causation. However, it is true that Luther's anti-Semitic sentiments were at very least a contributing factor in the Holocaust's atrocities. As a result, Luther's relation to the Holocaust cannot be ignored completely when evaluating his legacy.

Central to this debate on the tenor of Luther's legacy is whether or not Luther's anti-Semitism is anachronistically compared to Nazi or even modern anti-Semitism. When Luther's words were used by the Nazis they were quite often taken out of context and distorted in the sense that Luther never actually condemned the *race* of the Jewish people as a whole, but rather the *religion* of the Jewish people (Paras 9-10). While Hitler was concerned solely with exterminating the Jewish race, Luther was concerned for the spiritual well-being of his fellow Christians—fearing that they would be seduced by Judaism's claims and would decide to convert to that greatly misguided religion (Oberman 295). Luther's erroneous arguments against the Jewish people are therefore considered to be mostly theologically-based rather than racially-based—though not necessarily always theologically *sound*. However, at a certain point in his later years the distinction between the two became more indistinguishable (Probst). Though comparing sixteenth-century anti-Semitism and twentieth-century anti-Semitism may be anachronistic, and the two are certainly not equivalent, the fact remains that Luther advised people to cast out and destroy the possessions and livelihoods of the Jewish people and that the Nazis listened (Shirer 327). Despite any ideological distance Luther may have had from the Nazi ideals, for at least one practical purpose, they appear to be unfortunately comfortable with each other.

At this point, upon realizing the ugly reality of Luther's anti-Semitic views, Christians might wonder how Luther could have completely ignored Scripture that championed the Jewish people. How could he not have realized through his extensive study *and* translation of the Bible that the Jews were God's holy people and that *all* people were to be respected? The truth was before him, ready to be understood—yet

somehow he missed it completely. What is certainly one of the most confusing aspects of Luther's apparently authentic anti-Semitism is the degree to which it is inconsistent with his other theological works and with the temperament of his gracious and loving God.

One of Luther's works which simultaneously shows this obvious and perplexing disconnect is his treatise *Concerning Christian Liberty*, published in 1520. This is one work among many he wrote that displays his sincere belief in the equality of all men. A portion of the most well-known phrase of this treatise states, "A Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one" (*Concerning* 8). This is one point Luther argues eloquently throughout half of his entire work—that a Christian is subject to the law because of his overwhelming love for God and for his neighbor, not because of the law itself. He states that "man does not live for himself alone . . . but also for all men on earth" (27). He therefore treats his neighbor just as well as he would treat himself—a concept echoed throughout the Bible many times. Certainly the true Christian's service for other men must then include the Jewish people. This proclamation stands in direct opposition to Luther's statements in *On the Jews and Their Lies* which urge Christians to completely destroy the lives of the Jewish people. Those actions would break the laws of God if carried out by readers.

Luther also states in *Concerning Christian Liberty* that "faith alone and the efficacious use of the Word of God, bring salvation" (10). If this statement is true, and these are the only tools necessary to become saved, it stands to reason that the heritage of any given people group would not hinder their salvation. The Jewish people therefore have just as much chance to become saved as other unbelievers do, and cannot be written off as completely hopeless—even if the Jewish people of Luther's day were particularly

stubborn. Although in his work *Warning against the Jews* Luther does acknowledge that some Jews can be saved, he often somewhat paradoxically condemns those who are not *already* saved (James 64). In effect, he says that Jews cannot be saved after all (64). This shows an incongruous, double-minded view that fails to adhere to sound logic.\*

In his treatise, Luther also questions, “What greater rebellion, impiety, or insult to God can there be, than not to believe His promises?” (*Concerning* 14). This statement relates to the Jewish people especially in Deuteronomy 26:19, that specifically states that God promised his chosen people the Israelites special glory and honor among all the other nations of the earth. Again, there is no chance Luther would not have read this verse as well as others through his innumerable studies and translation of the Bible which specifically detail the promises God made to the Israelites in the Old Testament. However, it is also certain that Luther did not believe the Old Covenant was relevant anymore. He believed that the church was the new chosen people of God. He states in *On the Jews and Their Lies*,

For such ruthless wrath of God is sufficient evidence that [the Jewish people] assuredly have erred and gone astray. Even a child can comprehend this. For one dare not regard God as so cruel that he would punish his own people so long, so terrible, so unmercifully...Therefore this work of wrath is proof that the Jews, surely rejected by God, are no longer his people, and neither is he any longer their God.”

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\* It is interesting to note that in Luther’s closing statement to *On the Jews and Their Lies* he says, “May Christ, our dear lord, convert them mercifully”—completely contradicting his earlier statements about the inconvertibility of the Jews. This sort of contradiction was not completely uncommon for Luther (Paras 10).

It would be an understatement, then, to say that all of this information about Luther's anti-Semitism and the legacy it has left behind must be shocking to those members of the Christian community who have not heard it before. It is absolutely horrific. How does such a rational, moral mind such as Luther's believe such irrational and bigoted ideas? How can we ever hope to reconcile Luther's two faces? That the great Martin Luther should stand among the persecutors of Israel is nothing less than unbelievable. However, the information regarding Luther's anti-Semitism cannot be assessed accurately without the understanding that there is still more to his story than meets the eye. It *is* possible for his image as an upright Christian leader and historical exemplar to be defended and redeemed to a limited extent upon closer examination.

### **Luther's Defense**

The first weapon in the arsenal of Luther's defenders involves his health. The period of life in which Luther wrote his most definitively anti-Semitic works—including *On the Jews and Their Lies*—was after 1543, when he was sixty-two years old and had only three years yet to live. Within the last twelve years, he had suffered from a large number of serious maladies including seizures, frequent kidney stones, Ménière's disease with vertigo, arthritis, a throat abscess, ulcers, gout, and a number of other gastrointestinal disorders (Iversen; Edwards 9). Collectively, all of these illnesses could have affected his temperament adversely, as they would for practically anyone. This could have caused him to speak in an unfiltered way that he would not have had he been completely well. However, while this theory might contribute to an understanding of the worsening of the content of Luther's works, it does not account for his consistently harsh writing style.



This atypical writing style must also be taken into account when attempting to defend Luther's image. Luther frequently used scatological language, sarcasm, cruel words, and violent recommendations in order to get his point across to his readers in a startling way. This can be seen not only in works about the Jewish people, but those about the Catholics, the Turks, and other Protestants in polemical treatises such as *Against Hanswurst* and *Against the Papacy at Rome, Founded by the Devil* (Edwards 141). These works were in fact *more* caustic than those Luther wrote against the Jews (141). Luther, then, treated those parties that he viewed as his direct opponents in a relatively consistent manner. This was likely the result of an intentional means of argumentation (qtd. in 141). His rhetorical strategy—though harsh—*did* serve him well in his intentional weakening of the Catholic Church (6-7). The primary difference between his treatment of the Jews and of the Catholics is that Luther's righteous anger, when directed toward the Jewish people, was certainly not wielded within the realm of reason. In his *On the Jews and their Lies*, his recommendations for the Jewish people's forcible removal and the violent destruction of their livelihoods go much too far. When paired with Luther's call to action in this work, his typically astringent rhetoric transforms into something more sinister.

Luther's acerbic style of writing was not just restricted to the later years of *On the Jews and their Lies* with his declining health (Edwards 6). Luther was criticized from even the beginning of the Reformation for his scathing tone—and he himself acknowledges this in his own writings in 1520, 1521, and 1529 (6). In his later years, Luther demonstrates that this is indeed a deliberate strategy by changing his tone to fit his subject matter appropriately within his polemics, ranging from placid and logical to

fervent and harsh (18). This range decreases the likelihood that Luther's anti-Semitism could be completely attributed to his illness or any possible psychosis if he was able to create such nuanced writings even in his later years, though it is still true that his later works in general were less frequently tempered by positivity and sound theological reasoning.

The discussion of Luther's possible psychosis is indeed relevant to his defense as there is a modicum of evidence—including scientific diagnoses by modern researchers (Edwards 15)—which shows that he suffered from mental illness during the later period of his life. Reported symptoms include “frequent bouts of depression,” his “death-wish,” “vulgar and scatological language,” and his “outbursts of rage and vilification” (15). Erasmus, one of Luther's contemporaries, said of his work, “Had a man said this in the delirium of fever, could he have uttered anything more insane?” (Grisar 170). Boniface Amerbach, of the same time period, shared similar views (170). Luther himself recognized his struggles with mental illness in the form of depression and did not hesitate to write about them in his works, even advising others on what they should do if they were in the same position (Headley).

Some of Luther's ideas on the origins of depression may also prove insightful. Luther not only believed that mental illness could stem from genetics, as is most commonly believed today, but also that it could come from spiritual sources (Headley). He believed that depressive thoughts could be the results of Satan's work in tormenting humans (Headley), even reporting to have experienced “visions of and contests with the devil” (Edwards 17-18). All we can conclude about the subject is that if anyone would be

a target for Satan's fury at that time in history, it would have been Luther, the man who would lead a revolution of the church and lead lost souls back to Christ.

However, many critics choose to discount the meager evidence of Luther's mental disturbances and claim that Luther knew exactly what he was writing later in his life. Biographer Hartmann Grisar says of Luther, "No disturbance of Luther's intellectual functions or mental malady amounting to actual 'psychosis' can be assumed at any period of his life" (172). Evidence of his relatively healthy mental state comes in the form of the "persuasive exposition of doctrine and exegesis of Scripture" Luther completed even in his later years (Edwards 17-19), such as his non-polemical *On the Last Words of David*, which was published in 1543. Another piece of evidence is his ability to easily collaborate with others around that same time period (8).

Characteristics that could be attributed to Luther's psychosis could then simply be labeled as neuroses (Edwards 8-9). In regard to these neuroses, Luther's "scrupulous and tenacious" personality certainly enabled him to defy the Catholic Church and spark the Reformation in a way that a more "normal" man would not have dared to (8). Few others could have inspired the people the way that he did. Instead of his neurotic mind being a hindrance, it seems that it could have instead been a boon to his work. Luther's mind did not work in typical ways—though this certainly would not mean that he did not know what he was writing in the later years of his life. As a whole, evidence supporting Luther's failing mental health in his later years does not appear to be conclusive enough to excuse his later statements about the Jewish people, though it does serve to cast a shadow of doubt upon them.

Another train of thought which may provide some contextual explanation for Luther's harsh treatment of the Jewish people in his later years involves his belief that the Apocalypse was imminent (Oberman 291). He believed that he needed to use all of the rhetorical tools at his disposal in order to fight against the devil in that the final battle (Edwards 142). This contributed toward his urgency and lack of restraint in his words. He also believed that the devil's man, the pope, was the anti-Christ (Oberman 43) and the "devil's servants" included the Jewish people (Edwards 142). This idea can assist in the understanding of some of Luther's textual astringency, as it is true that he often directed works not to the people the works spoke of, but to the devil whom he believed they served—an implied relationship that certainly seems extremely harsh now, but in Luther's time was a relatively commonplace notion (17).

Further historical context of Luther's most controversial anti-Semitic work, *On the Jews and their Lies*, may also prove insightful. *On the Jews and their Lies* was written only months after Luther's daughter Magdalena died in his arms (Marius 377-378). Afterward, he grieved intensely and "spoke feelingly of the terror before death while affirming his trust in Christ" (378). The Jewish people, who did not believe that Jesus had been resurrected and had given hope to all Christians, may have served as an appropriate outlet for his frustrations (378). Luther also wrote this work in response to a now-lost Judaic tract which he had read the year before. As we cannot read this tract, we cannot understand the full catalytic context of Luther's own work, a context which might have shed light upon the reasons for his scathing tone and words (qtd. in Martin 337). However, understanding the reason for his words still would not condone them.

Another defense of Luther's legacy relates his works to their historical context: a culture of persecution prevalent in Europe. The late Middle Ages were not kind to the Jewish people in general. Discrimination against them came about as a result of a number of factors including economic rivalries (Durant 728), many countries' desire for nationalism (729), Jewish racial pride (727), and conflicting religious beliefs (727). Many national church councils were then openly hostile toward the Jewish people, enacting such restrictions as forbidding Jews to interact with Christians, practice as physicians, or hold public offices (729). They were sometimes required to wear identifying badges, live in specific living quarters, and attend religious services designed to convert them from Judaism (729). Some local governments reverted to the use of late Roman civil law regarding the Jewish people (qtd. in Rowan 81).

Because of their lower status in society, the Jewish people were either viewed with more suspicion when circumstances required a scapegoat or were sometimes deliberately framed for different crimes (Durant 721, 728). While the perpetrators of this discrimination were in the minority, this tendency was widespread enough to propagate a "murderous mania" (729-730). Rumors spread far and wide that they committed such crimes as practicing dishonest usury, poisoning wells, and killing the children of Gentiles to use their blood in religious rituals (Edwards 131).

This sort of general suspicion and resentment often lead to unjust persecution, violence, and death (Durant 729). Acts such as public executions, torture, stake burnings, and pogroms occurred during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in various countries in Europe (Grosser and Halperin). At its highest point of escalation in 1439, when the Jewish people were blamed for the spread of the Black Death, about 510 Jewish

communities were destroyed, with 3,000 killed in Erfurt and 12,000 in Bavaria alone (Durant 730). Many Jews were deported from their countries and their property was often confiscated (731). Propagandic *judensaus*, obscene images depicting Jews in relation to pigs, were widely used around Germany (Levy 387)—with one even stationed on the church of Wittenberg where Luther would someday preach. Tension between the Christian Catholic and Protestant views compounded the issue of anti-Semitism in Germany in the late 1530s and early 1540s, driving it to a near boiling point (Probst).

This atmosphere meant that Luther was certainly not alone in his severe views among prominent religious leaders. Probst notes that almost all of Luther's accusations against the Jewish people in *On the Jews and Their Lies* were ones frequently employed by other contemporary writers. Many considered Jews to be guilty of murdering Christ—whom had they rejected as Messiah—and thereby were completely rejected by God as his people (Edwards 121). Catholic theologian Johannes Eck shared Luther's late anti-Semitic fervor in his own writing—though he was, oddly enough, Luther's greatest rival (Probst). Luther's later works were strongly influenced by Anthonius Margaritha's 1530 work *The Whole Jewish Faith* (Probst). Though Margaritha was himself a converted Jew, he accused Jews of heresy, theft, and insurrection against the government (Probst). Luther often referenced this anti-Semitic work and recommended it highly to readers of his own *On the Jews and Their Lies*—some of whom were Protestants that mildly endorsed his work afterward (Edwards 135).

It is still true, though, that the persecution of Jews was a divisive issue in Luther's time. Many other prominent leaders firmly resided on the pro-Semitic side of this schism and defended the Jewish people from unjust accusations. Pope Clement VI and Emperor

Charles IV, for example, decried the rumor that it was the Jewish people who had poisoned wells which led to the Black Death (Durant 730). The Catholic Church also decided to seize Anthonius Margaritha's work soon after its publication for its anti-Semitic content (Rowan). Many Catholics called Luther's *On the Unknowable Name* cruel, violent, and instigative (Edwards 134), showing that not all held those views. General Protestant opinion on the anti-Semitic works—especially of *On the Jews and Their Lies*—was varied, with some openly condoning them (135). The effect of Luther's words had been that Protestantism became more anti-Semitic than the official Catholic Church, although it was still less anti-Semitic than the Catholic public (Durant 727). Other Christian figures condemned Luther's anti-Semitic works as well—though this was often done in covert ways. With his sound knowledge of the Talmud, Andreas Osiander refuted the idea that the Jewish people murder children—though he published these ideas in his tract anonymously (Probst). Another, Luther's own close friend Justus Jonas, disapproved of Luther's anti-Semitic feelings and thus deliberately misinterpreted his work *Against the Sabbatarians* with his Latin translation in order to make it appear more pro-Semitic than it really was (Probst). The secrecy of these refutations shows that those supporting the Jewish people were certainly in the minority at that time. Only the Catholics with their strength and already established position relative to Luther dared to directly oppose him.

Luther's later hatred of the Jewish people could then have been a result of a breakdown in his ability to resist the popular opinion of his peers and countrymen. Still, if this was what occurred, it would not have been much of an excuse. Luther defied the opinions of the majority in the most dramatic way possible when he chose to stand boldly

against the Catholic Church. Upholding views he had already expressed would not have been such a struggle for a veteran of courageous acts such as himself. Instead, Luther perpetuated a hateful culturally-promoted idea instead of overthrowing it as he had done with the Catholic Church (Levy 437), in direct opposition with the spirit of the actions for which most people know him.

As Luther was not actually insane, his anti-Semitic words appear to have meant exactly what he wished them to. The drastic change in Luther's approach to the Jewish people *could* simply be attributed to some cause which may never be fully realized—but this solution is disappointingly vague and unfulfilling. His caustic tone may have been a result of other factors though—including his belief that the Apocalypse was near, his personal writing style, and his very poor health. It may then be that he meant what he said, based on his theology, but that he said it in a way that he would have regretted under other circumstances. One might speculate that if, during his earlier years, Luther could read his own statements about the Jewish people, he would be just as horrified about them as other Christians are today. Unfortunately, it is impossible to truly know which of Luther's viewpoints represented the "true Luther" (438)—only conjecture can be made by men of his true heart.

What is certain is that Luther's horrific statements about the Jewish people can never be forgotten or dismissed lightly. His image cannot recover fully from their effect, nor should it—for words have consequences. Circumstances cannot absolve him, his admirable writings cannot save him, and illness cannot excuse him. In recent years many Lutheran churches and organizations, which are perhaps the most tangible aspect of Luther's legacy, have strongly rebuked his statements about the Jewish people ("Jewish



Relations,” “Time to Turn,” “Statement”). Meanwhile, anti-Semitic groups and neo-Nazis continue to use Luther’s later works in their own promotional material (Paras 4), as did the Nazis of World War II. Still, as a result of the doubt that any defense listed here may cast upon Luther’s anti-Semitic label, his works cannot be dismissed out of hand based on his intentions.

Upon accepting Luther’s guilt in the matter at hand, Christians can relate Luther’s theological writings to his defense in one of two ways. First, they can wholly discount them because of his tarnished image and claim that he never believed the scripturally-sound works which he wrote. Although it *is* possible for a man to change his mind or to be eloquent about matters which he has no actual belief in, it seems evident through Luther’s works and his life that he truly believed what he wrote and that his beliefs were embedded in his very soul. If he had not, would he have suffered intense persecution from the Catholic Church which included the threat of losing his home, his position as an established religious leader, and his own life? The answer seems clear—he truly believed the words that he wrote.

Christians must then choose to evaluate Luther’s works individually according to the words of Scripture—a choice that, though perhaps less politically correct, does not allow evil to completely corrupt the good. This, unlike secularism’s relative morality, allows anachronistic judgment. The Christian can say for sure that although Luther may have been affected by his circumstances, what is wrong today was also wrong in Luther’s age. The picture of the purity of Luther’s legacy then rests upon the worldview of the evaluator. Though the Christian and the secularist may agree on many factual points

about Luther, it will be more difficult to agree on whether or not Luther is ultimately absolved.

In the eyes of the secular world, Luther's words certainly condemn him and completely corrupt his image—for they do not ultimately hold all sins as the same. Luther's great sin of anti-Semitism—especially with the repercussions his words may have had for generations in Germany and in fact worldwide—causes him to lose his status as a “good person.” All the good that Luther did is tainted by his evil. Non-Christians may then use Christians' valuing of Luther to put down Christianity itself. Knowing about the ugly sides of our heroes ensures that Christians are not caught unawares by such attacks. Luther's image should not be shrouded in the mist of time, but must be examined critically and fairly—as we must be aware of *all* sides of Luther's lasting legacy.

The example of Martin Luther's controversial life and works can then only teach Christians that even our heroes, the ones who seem perfect in history books, have grievous sins. Making heroes of men can, after all, be a dangerous venture. This is not new to the Christian, though, who knows a world of dangerous heroes—the murderous David, the disobedient Moses, and the unfaithful Peter are venerated figures. The only difference between their sin and Luther's—and, indeed, our own—is how it is remembered by man. After all, at the end of all things, “. . . all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). If men are Christian, they *are* redeemed, but are also still sinners. Instead of requiring our heroes to be perfect, we should regard them as we regard all other men—fallen, disgraced, and human.

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