

THOMAS KAUFMANN

A portrait of Martin Luther, the German theologian, wearing a black cap and a black robe. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the right. The background is a light blue color.

Luther's
JEWS

A Journey into Anti-Semitism

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THOMAS KAUFMANN

Translated by
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Introduction

'Luther's Jews'—An Unavoidable Topic

On 28 January 1546, on a journey to Eisleben, his birthplace, Martin Luther suffered a heart attack. The journey was to be his last; three weeks later, on 18 February, he died. His description of this unpleasant and frightening event in a letter to his 'beloved wife' Käthe four days later contained a curious explanation, no doubt intended to reassure his wife, who had already been anxious when he set off:

I felt my strength leave me just outside Eisleben. It was my own fault. But if you'd been there you would have said it was the fault of the Jews or of their God. For just outside Eisleben we had to go through a village where a lot of Jews live and perhaps it was they who blew on me so hard. Eisleben is a place with more than fifty Jews and there is no doubt that as I passed through the village I felt such a cold wind blow through the carriage onto my head, through my cap, that it seemed as if my brain would turn to ice. That's probably what made me feel dizzy.¹

The symptoms as described by Luther, a seriously overweight 63-year-old, point to one explanation in modern medical language: a narrowing of the coronary blood vessels. Probably as a result of walking some distance alongside the coach²—his 'own fault'—Luther broke out in a sweat. The infarction was accompanied by severe pain and constriction in the chest (angina pectoris). The chest pains radiated into his left arm and this acute attack brought on nausea and dizziness. As the attack massively reduced his heart's pumping action his blood pressure plummeted, resulting in cold sweats and shivering. The low winter temperatures most

likely intensified this effect. The 'cold corridor', a depression between the Mansfeld plateau and the Hornburg ridge,* at the start of which lies the village of Rissdorf, nowadays Niederrissdorf, just outside Eisleben, is notorious for its biting east winds. These features of climate and topography may well have been responsible for Luther's particularly intense experience of life-threatening cold. Today the point on the Luther trail named 'Cold Place' is a reminder of this event, albeit the topography is not entirely accurate.

In the days that followed Luther did not take things easy. He was engaged in efforts that were ultimately successful to mediate in a quarrel between the Counts of Mansfeld and bring about a settlement. Equitable solutions to inheritance disputes were being sought; issues of sovereignty also involved rulings on church organization. From the start, however, Luther had a wider agenda: 'As soon as the main issues are settled I have to get on with expelling the Jews [...],' he wrote to Käthe in the letter quoted above of 1 February 1546.³ Although Albrecht, one of the ruling Counts of Mansfeld, was hostile to the Jews and had already disclaimed responsibility for them, Luther went on, as yet he had not done anything to them. 'God willing, I'll help Count Albrecht from the pulpit and also abandon them.'⁴ Thus the great reformer, this man who had long since become an iconic figure, who was both regarded with awe by his followers and assailed by enemies and opponents, had one final 'earthly' care as he returned to Eisleben, where his life had begun, namely the expulsion of a few dozen Jews from Mansfeld. Thanks to the protection of the Dowager Countess Dorothea von Mansfeld-Vorderort the Jews had found refuge there when they were forced to leave the bishopric of Merseburg. Among the places where Luther spent a significant length of time, Eisleben was the only one in which Jews were tolerated during his lifetime. His attempts to expel them from there too were to succeed after his death.

In the last sermons Luther preached in the church of St Andrew in Eisleben shortly before his death he expounded the distinctiveness of

* Translators' note: an area of high ground near Mansfeld in present-day Saxony-Anhalt.

faith in Christ, contrasting it to the religion of the Jews, Turks, and 'Papists'. Christians must be conscious that they can neither eradicate nor fight against the opponents of the true faith. The Church, he said, would go on being under siege and in need of forgiveness; it had to live with difference. At the conclusion to his final sermon in Eisleben, preached on 14 or 15 February, he added a *Warning Against the Jews*,⁵ in which he spoke out against having Jews in the country, as they did 'great damage'. For that reason, they should either be converted and baptized or banished. The fact that Christ was 'cousin' to the Jews and 'born of their flesh and blood'⁶ might be a motive for converting them, but according to Luther 'Jewish blood' had now become 'more watery and wild' and so of 'inferior quality' by comparison with Jesus's day.⁷ Nowadays Jews were constantly slandering and violating Christ, Mary, and us Christians by using terms such as 'whore's child', 'whore', and 'changeling'. Particular care was necessary if Jews claimed to be doctors, for they had the skill to poison their victims in such a way that death ensued months or even years later and so nothing could be proved against them. Those, however, who allowed this to happen shared in the guilt of this 'alien sin':⁸ 'For this reason you who are rulers should not tolerate them but rather drive them away. But if they convert, renounce their usury and accept Christ we shall gladly regard them as our brothers.'⁹ Any Jew who refused to convert the reformer regarded as a slanderer of Christ who had nothing else in mind than to 'suck Christians dry and, if he can, kill them'.¹⁰

Luther's last public statement, which appeared in print after his death, was an emphatic warning to Christian society against being implicated in 'Jewish sin'. Jews in his view 'contaminated' a Christian community by their evil ways, which in addition to blasphemous practices included 'perverse' economic and other activities. All their energies were aimed at destroying Christians and this must inevitably bring down God's wrath upon them. 'Conversion' or 'expulsion': there was no other option because the Jews were so dangerous: they were poisoners; they were sorcerers in league with the Devil, their God, and had been out to kill Luther himself for years; they were idolaters and

blasphemers whom God would crush. Luther's wife shared his fear of the Jews. He also assumed his listeners would concur with him and, as far as we know, this Wittenberg theology professor did not in fact put them off with his anti-Jewish vitriol. Even Count Albrecht VII of Mansfeld-Hinterort was compliant; from 1547 Luther's homeland was 'free of Jews'.

The reformer's hatred of the Jews incorporated features that cannot simply be labelled 'theological' or 'religious' and go beyond the traditional Christian hostility to the Jews that can already be seen in the New Testament. Luther's reference to the quality of Jewish blood and to extortion and usury, his claim that Jews committed murder by poisoning and similar accusations were fed from the various murky channels of a specifically pre-modern anti-Semitism, in other words from a hostility resting on the belief that this 'species of humanity' shared a specific 'nature'.¹¹

Luther took pre-modern anti-Semitism for granted, adopted it, and helped to spread it. In the light of the expectations that people considered themselves justified in placing upon Luther as a theologian, religious communicator, profound biblical exegete, and German professor, and in view of the authority he acquired as hero of the Reformation and 'father of the Protestant Church', his contempt for the Jews, which was unchecked by theological rigour, has serious implications. In our times it casts a deep shadow over his personality and his achievements. The fact that in the early days of the Reformation Luther, by virtue of his book *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew* (1523), did more than anyone else in the sixteenth century to further unconditional toleration of the Jews, indeed to further religious toleration in general, is largely forgotten as a result of the image of the ageing Luther as hostile to them. But this is a mistake. No other figure from the Reformation period even approaches Luther in the depth of his inner contradictions and his ambivalent behaviour towards the Jews, for he was Janus-faced, his intellect the 'battleground' for two opposing eras.

The history of his reception swings between his being seen as supporting those hostile to the Jews and those favourably disposed towards

them. There is some justification for both views, a fact that reveals the deep ambiguity in his attitude to the 'Jewish question'. Today Luther scholars are as divided as ever on this matter. Admittedly, the fact that in the present day his attitude to the Jews has become a sort of pivotal issue in understanding his character and theology must be regarded as a new development by comparison with the views of Luther prevailing from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. For in older studies the question of his stance towards the Jews was not even considered, let alone made a focus of interest. This new development is particularly closely bound up with the reception of Luther in the first half of the twentieth century.

Older histories of the Protestant church, particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, highlighted the younger reformer's 'call for tolerance'. The increased efforts of Pietists to evangelize the Jews made them speak out for toleration. The overall impression is that in the later seventeenth century and above all in the eighteenth, the century of the Enlightenment, Luther's hostility to the Jews was largely forgotten. Towards the end of the sixteenth century the dissemination of the most extreme of his 'Jewish writings', *On the Jews and their Lies* (1543), had been forbidden by Imperial decree; none the less, in the age of confessional rivalry Lutheran theologians quoted it to oppose granting Jews the right to reside in Protestant cities and territories. Pietists, on the other hand, disregarded it. It was, however, included in the big Luther editions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A 'proto-racist' pamphlet by the Leipzig preacher Ludwig Fischer, who in 1838 used quotations from, amongst other sources, *On the Jews and their Lies*, to combat contemporary moves to emancipate the Jews and oppose the ideals of the French Revolution, clearly indicates that Luther's hatred of the Jews functioned as a sort of mental resource. Even when inactive, it remained in people's consciousness and could be reactivated at any time.

In 1910 Reinhold Lewin, who subsequently became a rabbi, wrote a dissertation on Luther's attitude towards the Jews (*Luthers Stellung zu den Juden*), in which he emphasized the tension between the early and late

Luther and employed psychology to explain it. This study heralded the start of scholarly research into the topic. The dissertation won the annual prize of the Protestant Theology Faculty at the University of Breslau and the following year it was published in a prestigious theological series edited, among others, by Reinhold Seeberg, a theologian who was later linked to the Nazi Party (NSDAP). In 1916 Gotthard Deutsch, the author of the Luther entry in the fourth edition of the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, stressed that at the beginning of the twentieth century references to Luther from those hostile to and benevolent towards the Jews were evenly balanced. Towards the end of the Weimar Republic, however, this balance between the contrasting standpoints on the Jews held by the younger and older Luther was shifting more and more clearly. Under the influence of the ‘German faith’ movement and racist ideologies, on the one hand Protestant theologians made use of Luther’s *On the Jews and their Lies* in a concerted effort to connect with the anti-Semitic *Zeitgeist*. On the other, proponents of *völkisch*[†] ideology, with its emphasis on ethnicity and German racial superiority, appropriated Luther as a forerunner of anti-Semitism and accused the ‘Jewified’ Protestant church of suppressing this essential characteristic of his. Selected extracts from his 1543 treatise now appeared in mass editions, first in a version edited by the Saxon Luther scholar Georg Buchwald. A later edition was published by Mathilde Ludendorff,[‡] whose works propounded a religion based on German ethnicity. Finally, the Luther scholar Theodor Paul, an adherent of the ‘German Christians’,[§] also brought out a version. What these truncated, pamphlet-like editions, which in some cases grossly distorted Luther’s text, had in common

[†] Translators’ note: *völkisch* denotes an ideology and movement dating from c. 1900 that stressed the importance of ethnicity in determining national identity and considered that human mentalities and national cultures were largely shaped by race/ethnicity. These beliefs were usually accompanied by anti-Semitism.

[‡] Translators’ note: second wife of General Erich Ludendorff, who was a highly influential figure in German politics from 1916 to 1918.

[§] Translators’ note: ‘German Christians’ were members of the Protestant churches who, during the Nazi period, attempted to reconcile Nazi ideology with Christian beliefs.

was that they omitted, either partially or completely, the lengthy passages, constituting about two thirds of the text, in which the reformer attempted to prove, using Old Testament texts, that Jesus was Israel's Messiah, as foretold by prophecy. Thus what was of primary importance to Luther the biblical scholar, namely to demonstrate that his Christian reading of the Old Testament was the only legitimate one, was something that interested the adherents of the 'German faith' movement and their Christian variants not one bit.

In the Munich Luther edition, which was closely linked to the Confessing Church,** *On the Jews and their Lies* was introduced as 'the work to which Luther owes his fame as a leading anti-Semite'. According to the editor, the missiologist Walter Holsten, it was 'a veritable arsenal of the weapons of which anti-Semitism had availed itself'.¹² This appraisal was not very far off that of the Catholic Adolf Hitler, who had allegedly hailed Luther as a 'great man', a 'giant', who 'at a stroke' had pierced the 'twilight' and seen 'the Jew as we are only beginning to see him today'.¹³ Against the backdrop of judgments such as this it hardly seems absurd that Julius Streicher, the founder of the anti-Semitic propaganda paper *Der Stürmer*, who was condemned to death at Nuremberg for crimes against humanity, appealed at his trial to Luther's late work on the Jews and proclaimed that Luther and not he should be in the dock.

In the early stages of his espousal of the Jewish cause—which was unprecedented in the Protestant church¹⁴—Dietrich Bonhoeffer admittedly also made use of Martin Luther (not only his treatise *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew* of 1523 but also the argument he put forward in his *Warning Against the Jews* of 1546 that if Jews converted they were to be treated as full members of the congregation and community,¹⁵ a view that could not be reconciled with the introduction of the Aryan Paragraph into the realm of the church). This fact emphasizes how

** Translators' note: established in 1934, the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) was a grouping of Lutherans who resisted the influence of Nazi ideology on Christian doctrine.

confused, ambivalent, and equivocal Luther's influence in the Third Reich could be. But in the final analysis the lone voice of Bonhoeffer changes little as far as the main tendency in the history of Luther reception is concerned. Church leaders such as provincial bishop Martin Sasse of Thuringia referred to Luther's hostility towards the Jews to justify their enthusiasm for the burning of Jewish synagogues during the Reich 'Night of Broken Glass' [*Kristallnacht*] on 9/10 November 1938; his polemical pamphlet *Martin Luther on the Jews: Away with Them!*, which was published in a print run of 100,000 copies, contained amongst other things a compilation of quotations from *On the Jews and their Lies* and may well have been one of the most effective vehicles for the dissemination of the image of Luther as an 'anti-Semite for our time'. By drawing on Luther, leading voices from the Church and theological circles were demonstrating that Protestant Christianity could be adapted to fit in with the ideological *Zeitgeist* that was remaking politics and society and moulding them to an ideology based on race and German ethnicity and could make its own contribution to the 'anti-Semitism required today for the good of our nation', as the Church historian Erich Vogelsang put it.¹⁶

Against the background of this reception history it is not surprising that in the end the enemies of National Socialist Germany adopted this model of Luther interpretation and saw in him Hitler's forerunner. This genealogical construction, which—and this should not be forgotten—was of course a continuation of the German Christians' and Nazi line of interpretation but from a negative perspective, reached a sort of high point in a pamphlet by a British schoolteacher named Peter F. Wiener and entitled 'Martin Luther. Hitler's Spiritual Ancestor' (1945). A reprint of this pamphlet, published by the American Atheist Press in 1999, has on its title page a mound of corpses of Jews killed in the gas chambers. For Wiener Luther is the radical opponent of the liberal intellect on which the modern world was built. He is the enemy of reason, a servant of princes, an apostle of absolutism, the one who inaugurated the mental habit of obedience and of slavish subordination characteristic of the Germans. Luther, it is claimed, advocated an annihilation of the

Jews of a kind that not even Hitler surpassed. A judgement such as this, first published in 1945 but repeatedly adopted and confirmed by modern commentators, makes Luther appear as the originator of that unique crime against humanity summed up in the name *Auschwitz*.

A major objection to this view is the fact that the form of anti-Semitism that aimed to eliminate the Jews, to kill them systematically, was completely alien to the historical Luther. It also ignores the fact that Luther directed severe criticism at the failings of the Protestant church also and feared God's devastating wrath if their own sin was compounded by the 'alien sin' of the Jews. In addition, it is an inadmissible simplification of the complex genealogy of modern biology-inspired anti-Semitism to claim Luther as one of its sources, let alone a leading one. The measures he advocated in 1543 to deal with the Jews, which by our standards are inhuman, were intended to demoralize them and possibly cause some to convert. To his mind, however, these measures were the 'worse' solution; in his view the best would have been to expel the Jews and resettle them in territory ruled over by Christians' 'hereditary enemy', the Turks. Luther's aim was not to establish a 'racially pure' state, but a religiously homogeneous society of Christians that did not tolerate any religious dissent.

What is evident is that Protestant theologians with Nazi sympathies or 'lay people' with a Lutheran background were not only among those who made the reformer out to be complicit in the most gruesome crimes in human history but were primarily responsible for doing so. Admittedly, the really 'tragic' aspect of this is precisely that Luther's own writings, his repellent, hate-filled tirades against the Jews, made the task easy. Luther is no more a simple 'victim' in this process than he deserved to be in the dock at Nuremberg.

Luther's hatred of the Jews, his bitterness over their alleged blasphemies against Christ, his fear of their secret activities and their 'sucking dry' the defenceless people who took loans from them, his anxiety that by tolerating them he would be complicit in their blasphemy (a crime punishable by death in Luther's day) and equally deserving of the wrath God would pour down on them: these things can be

understood only within the context of the mentality and cultural environment of the sixteenth century.

The aim of this book is therefore to understand Luther's attitude to the Jews against the background of his age, which means to view it in the light of what was normal at the time. I shall devote particular attention also to the character and status of his pronouncements and their intended audience; it is of central relevance to be clear about the specific context in which Luther made any given statement. For that reason, I seek to distinguish more clearly the types of text and types of communication he used when speaking about the Jews than 'Luther scholars' often do. Bearing in mind the methods and emphases I have indicated, the reader has the opportunity to decide whether and how far Luther's position, which changed radically between 1523 and 1543, deserves to be called extreme, even judging by the standards of the sixteenth century.

The book's title *Luther's Jews* was chosen with the following considerations in mind. Although 'Luther and the Jews' would have sounded more usual—the linking word 'and' combined with the definite article creates distance and suggests objectivity—it is important to make clear from the outset that when Luther's subject is 'Jews' there is nothing objective about it; he is in no way referring to something distinct and unambiguous. Luther's Jews are a conglomerate of ill-defined fears, calculated publishing projects, and targeted use of biblical traditions, and also of resentment, cultural traditions, and sheer fantasy—in other words, a phantom. This book cannot therefore be an attempt to reconstruct Luther's relationship to the Jews in the sense of a personal 'relationship' with individual representatives of the Jewish faith of his day, even if the few instances of his actual contact with Jews for which there is solid biographical proof will receive due scrutiny (see Chapter 1). The title *Luther's Jews* is designed to alert the reader to the fact that this is a serious topic because Luther took it up and gave it substance and because the term 'Jews' encompassed subjects and issues he believed he must confront and to which he therefore devoted great attention. The view that an enquiry into 'Luther and the Jews' arises primarily as a response to the twentieth-century history of Luther reception and

exaggerates the significance of the topic for him is inadequate. Although it is indisputable that twentieth-century reception has given powerful impetus to the investigation of this issue, it is nevertheless evident that for the historical Luther the 'Jews' were of central importance in a variety of ways, not least as a negative foil against which to set his own teaching. The 'Jews' may have been almost completely absent from the world he inhabited, but they are omnipresent in the writings produced by that world.

Luther's fear and hatred of the Jews were of their time, but the fact that this circumstance has not proved a barrier to their being taken up in the twentieth century is fundamentally linked to the deeply rooted tendency in Protestant history to monumentalize Luther the reformer and to appropriate his theology and quote it as being always 'timely' and adaptable to the current situation. The only way forward is to accept the truth, no doubt painful to some but theologically inescapable, that we can no more put our faith blindly in Luther's theology than responsible twenty-first-century adults would voluntarily place themselves in the hands of a sixteenth-century surgeon.

I myself translated all the Latin quotations in this book into German. The use of inverted commas with certain terms (for example, 'Jewish writings', the 'Jewish question', 'free of Jews', 'proto-racist') indicates that they have ideological colourings that can be avoided if the reader is made conscious of them.

Chapter 1

Neighbours yet Strangers

Jews on the Fringes of Luther's World

In the pre-modern era Jewish life was governed by precise legal dispensations that were fundamentally distinct from the conditions under which Christians lived. The basis for the special treatment of the Jews was their perpetual servitude (*servitus judaeorum perpetua*), which arose from their ineradicable guilt in causing the death of Jesus. In the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation during the late Middle Ages the legal category of 'treasury servitude' (*Kammerknechtschaft*) had been established to link any right the Jews might be granted to exist to the Imperial Treasury, which was entitled to levy taxes on them. In this way their servitude, which was theological in origin, acquired the quality of a secular jurisdiction, from which rights of protection for the Jews were derived.

From the fourteenth century onwards it became customary for the Imperial rights of protection for the Jews to be extended to other authorities, such as rulers of individual states or magistrates of Free Imperial Cities, in the form of so-called 'Jewish prerogatives'. As states developed greater individual sovereignty in the Early Modern period, rights to protect the Jews became an integral part of the ruler's powers. Jewish taxes, which the authorities received in exchange for fixed-term rights of residence, granting in return charters of protection, formed a significant source of revenue.