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Luther and Antisemitism Revisited

PAUL J. SCHARF, M.Div.
Church Ministries Representative
The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry
pscharf@foi.org

Introduction

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation
for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.
For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith;
as it is written, "The just shall live by faith." (Rom. 1:16-17)

My Passion

I love the Reformation! I fully agree and admit that—humanly speaking—my theological tradition would not exist as it does today without the light of the Reformation springing forth through Martin Luther in 1517 … and before him through John Wycliffe and Jan Hus in the late 14th and early 15th centuries.

Post Tenebras Lux—"After the Darkness, Light!" That was the theme of this, one of the most fascinating periods in all of history, and certainly one of the greatest renewals in church history. That light—the light that sprang from *faith alone*, *grace alone*, *Christ alone*, *Scripture alone* and *the glory of God alone*—still shines brightly down to us today.

Make no mistake about it, I view Luther as one of the greatest heroes of all of history. He was a man of incredible gifting and strengths, such as few others have ever possessed, as demonstrated by his ability to stand, unyielding, before the worldly powers of his time and hold that holy ground on which he stood. I desire to understand Luther and interpret his words correctly; I have no desire to deconstruct or denigrate him unnecessarily.

On the other hand, as Luther clearly taught us, "We daily sin much and, indeed, deserve nothing but punishment."[1] And that includes him. And, as has often been noted, our

[1] Martin Luther, *Doctor Martin Luther's Small Catechism*, C. Gausewitz, ed. (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1956), p. 180.

weaknesses many times mirror our strengths—both in terms of sphere and intensity. Luther was truly a man of tremendous strengths, as well as profound weaknesses.

Furthermore, none of the first, or even second, generation of Reformers could possibly have been expected to deal with every aspect of theology in the short and painful lives they lived. That is why Christians in our dispensational tradition view the Reformation less as the perfect standard (organized through creeds, confessions and catechisms) and more as a wonderful starting point—*Semper Reformanda* … keep reforming!

When it comes to a subject such as Luther and the Jewish people, and especially the repulsive things he said about them at the end of his life, we find that there is much inherent confusion, anguish, doubt, disgust and defensiveness. Some modern historians add to the perplexity by seeking to use Luther's words to their own ends, even as Hitler and his Nazi Party did.

My purpose in this paper is to untangle this bewilderment, to every extent possible, and provide significant understanding that others will find useful regarding this most difficult and sensitive topic.

This is not to say that my intention is to excuse Luther. This issue is so severe that, as one strong enthusiast of the Reformation writes bluntly, "… one wishes [Luther] had died before writing [*On the Jews and Their Lies*]."[2]

Luther's relationship to the Jewish people during the final years of his life will never be our model for sanctified living or Christian ministry, in my estimation. However, it must be examined and interpreted properly, in its historical situation.[3]

Another reason that I care so deeply about this issue is that I have a heart of profound gratitude and love to and for the Jewish people (cf. Rom. 3:2; 9:1-5; 10:1; Eph. 2:12). They have given us the Scriptures and the Savior, and will provide the homeland of Messiah's coming kingdom when He returns (Zech. 8:3; 14:16). It is my privilege to represent a ministry that was literally founded to rescue Jewish people from the onslaught of the Holocaust—immediately after its beginning at Kristallnacht.[4]

My Testimony

I was raised and educated in Confessional Lutheranism from my earliest days, and the Reformation has been the object of my lifelong fascination. When I was six years old, if

[2] Michael Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2009), p. 84.
[3] As Kaufmann states, "Luther's hatred of the Jews … can be understood only within the context of the mentality and cultural environment of the sixteenth century." Thomas Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism*, trans. by Lesley Sharpe and Jeremy Noakes (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 9-10.
[4] See Paul Scharf; "Walking Over Broken Glass." The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry; 3 November 2023; https://www.foi.org/2023/11/03/walking-over-broken-glass/; Internet; accessed 27 August 2026.

you had asked me what holiday was represented by October 31, I would have proudly responded, “Reformation Day!”

I feel that the spiritual trajectory of my life has somewhat followed the course of church history. I began in Lutheranism, where I obtained extensive grounding in the knowledge of the Scriptures, along with the ancient creeds, Reformation confessions, *Luther’s Small Catechism* and Protestant history. Since then, I have moved on to a wider appreciation of the Evangelical church and a deeper understanding of the Bible, interpreted literally, resulting in the acceptance of a traditional dispensational framework for viewing history. I am also committed, in my theology, to a free, baptistic church.

As I have grown further from my Lutheran upbringing, however, I have found myself being drawn closer to my passion for the Reformation. Perhaps this has been motivated by a desire to understand more about the faith that was first inculcated in me, and how it impacted my own soul, as well as countless others through the previous five centuries. I have also developed an insatiable hunger for discerning how dispensationalism ultimately grew out of that seedbed of Biblical truth—with its emphasis on literal interpretation of *Scripture alone*. I have become captivated by the history of the English Bible and its relation to these matters, as both a result of the Reformers’ work and a catalyst of ongoing Reformation.

All of this culminated for me in a tour I had the privilege of taking in 2017 to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, tracing Luther’s footsteps throughout central and northeastern Germany over the course of seven life-changing days.[5]

The Reformers Bequeathed to Us a Cruel Dilemma

As noted above, there is one aspect of the Reformation which is not a cause of rejoicing, but of enormous grief. This is the anti-Jewish enmity that is, heartbreakingly, embedded within the Reformation story.

Some the greatest words spoken in the history of Western civilization flowed from the lips of Martin Luther. Yet, sadly, Luther’s mouth also formed—and his hand also penned—some of the most hideous expressions imaginable against the Jewish people.

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[5] The tour was led primarily by Dr. James White. Also, in 2017, I had the privilege of being part of two book projects marking the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. I was honored to be one of the authors of *Forged From Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy*, gen. eds. Christopher Cone and James I. Fazio (El Cajon, CA: Southern California Seminary Press, 2017). I contributed chapter 15, “Solus Christus,” pp. 465-493. I also had the opportunity to help compile, and serve as the editor for, Andy Woods, *Ever Reforming: Dispensational Theology and the Completion of the Protestant Reformation* (Taos, NM: Dispensational Publishing House, 2018). Additionally, I was the editor for, and assisted in the completion of, a Bible tract written by Dr. Woodrow Kroll, called “What Have We Learned in 500 Years?” (Taos, NM: Dispensational Publishing House, 2017). I am currently in the process of writing two ongoing series of articles related to the Reformation: *The Reformation at 500* and *Tyndale at 500*. These appear on various websites, including SermonAudio.com/pscharf and SharperIron.org. Finally, related to this topic I was also blessed to serve as the editor for Mark Musser, *Nazi Ecology: The Oak Sacrifice of the Judeo-Christian Worldview in the Holocaust* (Taos, NM: Dispensational Publishing House, 2018).

Had he simply refrained from uttering such things that were, in the very best possible light, extraneous to his real purpose, his record would have been preserved in an exceedingly purer condition.

Again, this investigation is conducted by one who recognizes the immense contribution that Luther has made to the Christian world, the impact of which is still felt today. It is also made by one who thoroughly enjoys the story of Luther's life and appreciates so much of the wisdom that he shared.

So as to the question at hand, the purpose of this inquiry is neither to incriminate Luther unduly, nor to quickly pardon him, but rather to apprehend him clearly in the milieu of his day, and then to evaluate him fairly and Biblically.

The Complexity of the Issue

This is an incredibly difficult assignment for a vast array of reasons. For one thing, it is an extremely unpleasant and controversial topic. For another, it touches on so many questions, from such numerous fronts, from so long ago, that providing a comprehensive overview—much less a vigorous conclusion—on the subject is nearly impossible in a book, say nothing of a paper of this scope.

As we evaluate the sources analyzed, one must also keep in mind the need to interpret the interpreters. Do they have their own theological, social or political axes to grind?

Some are in the realm of hagiography, and attempt to absolve Luther of all his transgressions. Many others are written by theological liberals, who would just as soon destroy Luther's credibility completely, and also condemn any attempt to take the gospel of the Messiah to the Jewish people. Modern historians see through a contemporary lens and read Luther back only through the screen of the Holocaust, and in its shadows.

There are also fundamental differences between these interpreters. Some make a distinction between Luther being "anti-Jewish"—a largely religious category, focused on his anger at their unbelief—and modern, scientific antisemitism, which is hatred for the Jewish people on an ethnic basis.[6]

Some see a marked change in Luther over the course of his life—especially when comparing his work of 1523, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, with his 1543 diatribe, *On the Jews and Their Lies*. Others view a continuum, and see latent anti-Judaism all throughout Luther's life.

[6] For the sake of simplicity and consistency, I will use the word *antisemitism* in a very general sense throughout this paper to refer to any animosity against the Jewish people. It has been argued that such usage is anachronistic in Luther's time. However, as is evident from this paper, the term is often used by historians and scholars to refer to Luther's period.

Finally, there is the hope—with which I find myself sympathetic—of resolving the situation on the basis of Luther's grief, frustration, clearly diminishing health, and arguably lessening mental abilities as he neared the end of his life.[7]

If I can add any new or novel insight to this entire enigma, it would be this practical lesson: By the time Luther wrote and said the horrible things he uttered about the Jewish people, he was simply "too big to fail." Perhaps, for the sake of argument, we might guess that he was even suffering from some form of dementia by that time—we will never know for sure. But, regardless, there was no one around him to tell him, "No!"—with the power to stop him. This is a danger for Christian leaders in every generation.

What we can say with certainty is this: When Luther was at the apex of his ministry, his Reformation, and his vast publishing career—and when he had his health and all his faculties, he was called, "protector of Jews."[8] May all of us seek to emulate him in that regard.

The Record of the Historians

Some renowned authorities draw a direct line from Luther to Hitler, blaming the Reformer for supplying energy to the most hellish Nazi regime.

William Shirer, in his famous and authoritative work, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, minces no words in placing great blame upon Luther for the horrendous destruction that ripened in the 20th century. He states:

> There is not space in this book to recount adequately the immense influence that Martin Luther, the Saxon peasant who became an Augustinian monk and launched the German Reformation, had on the Germans and their subsequent history. But it may be said, in passing, that this towering but erratic genius, this savage anti-Semite and hater of Rome, who combined in his tempestuous character so many of the best and the worst qualities of the German—the coarseness, the boisterousness, the fanaticism, the intolerance, the violence, but also the honesty, the simplicity, the self-scrutiny, the passion for learning and for music and for poetry and for righteousness in the eyes of God—left a mark on the life of the Germans, for both good and bad, more indelible, more fateful, than was wrought by any other single individual before or since. Through his sermons and his magnificent translation of the Bible, Luther created the modern German language, aroused in the people not only a new Protestant vision of Christianity but a fervent German nationalism and taught them, at least in religion, the supremacy of the individual conscience. But tragically for them, Luther's siding with the princes in the peasant risings, which he had largely inspired, and his passion for political autocracy ensured a mindless and provincial political absolutism which reduced the vast majority of the German people to poverty, to a horrible torpor and a demeaning subservience. Even worse perhaps, it helped to perpetuate and indeed to sharpen the hopeless

[7] For an authoritative survey of this aspect of the topic, see Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531-46* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983). See chapter 1, "Anger and Illness," pp. 6-19.
[8] See Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism: Against His Better Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), p. 130.

> divisions not only between classes but also between the various dynastic and political groupings of the German people. It doomed for centuries the possibility of the unification of Germany.[9]

Later, Shirer adds:

> It is difficult to understand the behavior of most German Protestants in the first Nazi years unless one is aware of two things: their history and the influence of Martin Luther. The great founder of Protestantism was both a passionate anti-Semite and a ferocious believer in absolute obedience to political authority.[10]

He goes on to say that Luther's horrible statements regarding the Jewish people was "advice that was literally followed four centuries later by Hitler, Goering and Himmler."[11]

Eric Gritsch offers a more generous approach, and shares this striking quote, which provides a good place to begin this consideration: "… after fifteen hundred years of Christian anti-Semitism, Luther felt forced to conclude that the existing hatred of the Jews revealed the hatred of God. *This conclusion is a violation of his own rule, so vehemently established and enforced against Erasmus in 1525, that to speculate about the hidden God 'is no business of ours.' To do so is against Luther's better judgment."*[12]

And Thomas Kaufman here makes an extremely important point:

> … the form of anti-Semitism that aimed to eliminate the Jews, to kill them systematically, was completely alien to the historical Luther. … 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.[13]

Gritsch concurs, stating: "It is an irony of history that the holocaust made no distinction between converted Jewish Christians and unconverted Jews; Luther would have welcomed the former and persecuted the latter."[14]

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[9] William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), p. 91. Without addressing the topic head on, Shirer is clearly alluding here to the heart of one of the main issues involved: the complex matter of authority, with regard to church ministry, in a magisterial church-state. Had Luther theoretically lived and ministered in the context of a free church, perhaps he never would have said anything like he did about the Jewish people at all. It also appears that Shirer ascribes to Luther a measure of influence which is almost superhuman—perhaps more than warranted.

[10] Shirer, p. 236.

[11] Ibid. Gritsch raises the issue that Kristallnacht, the launch of the Holocaust, occurred "in all parts of Germany during the night before Luther's birthday (November 9-10)," p. ix.

[12] Gritsch, p. 77. Emphasis in original.

[13] Kaufmann, p. 9.

[14] Gritsch, p. 29-30. On this point, see also Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), p. 92, 94; and Erwin W. Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross: How the Cross Was Used to Promote the Nazi Agenda* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016), pp. 107-109. When we hear of Lutheran persecution of Jewish people, we must again remember that this was primarily a matter of the church-state configuration of the magisterial Reformation—the only system that Luther and many others of his time could fathom.

And Heiko Oberman stated, “Even as late as the pamphlet *Concerning the Jews and Their Lies* (1543), summarized again in his last admonition (1546), Luther continues to endorse that form of toleration which leaves room for conversion.”[15]

Luther’s Times—A Culture of Antisemitism

Shirer makes a very bold claim about the leader of the Reformation: “… in his utterances about the Jews, Luther employed a coarseness and brutality of language unequaled in German history until the Nazi time.”[16]

Indeed, there is no way to sugarcoat the horrible things that Luther, as well as other Reformers—say nothing of Roman Catholic and worldly leaders of the 16th century—said regarding the Jewish people. The best one could hope to do in their defense is to attempt to understand their words in their historical context and, putting the best construction possible on them (as Luther himself would advise us), determine to discern the true nature of their vitriol. However, Shirer’s words may still be a bit over the top, when one digs deeper into the history of Luther’s times.

Oberman wrote: “Hatred of the Jews was not an invention of the sixteenth century. It was an inherited assumption.”[17]

Kirsi Stjerna states: “Luther was born into a world where major expulsions of Jews had taken place and where frequent and random expulsions and acts of violence toward Jews still continued.”[18]

Luther truly inherited an antisemitic ethos, to put it mildly. England was thoroughly inhospitable to the Jewish people. Gritsch summarizes broadly, stating: “Jews remained the enemy of Christian civilization…. In 1290, King Edward I of England expelled Jews from the land, and in 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain did the same.”[19]

That was when Luther was eight years old. Just weeks before they would commission Christopher Columbus to “[sail] the ocean blue,” Spanish King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella first unveiled the Edict of Expulsion. These ardent Roman Catholic rulers

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[15] Heiko A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism In the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*, trans. by James I. Porter (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 123.
[16] Shirer, p. 236.
[17] Oberman, p. xi.
[18] Kirsi I. Stjerna, “The Jew in Luther’s World,” in Brooks Schramm and Stjerna eds., *Martin Luther, the Bible and the Jewish People: A Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), p. 21.
[19] Gritsch, p. 22. Kaufmann states, “The King of England was the first in medieval history to expel the Jews entirely; from 1290 onwards the country was ‘free of Jews’. In 1394 the French King placed a ban on Jews residing in France….” (p. 24). For corroborating details, including events affecting Jewish people in Germany, see Stjerna, “The Jew in Luther’s World,” pp. 21-24; and Barry E. Horner, *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must Be Challenged* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), pp. 25-26. For more on Ferdinand and Isabella, see Paul Scharf; “Tisha B’av and the Hope That Will Be Restored.” The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry; 9 August 2019; https://www.foi.org/2019/08/09/tisha-bav-and-the-hope-that-will-be-restored/; Internet; accessed 27 August 2026.

enforced conversion of the Jewish people—or else their deportation. In the chaos that followed this tyranny, many of them died horrible deaths.

As the Jewish people fled, they encountered more and greater tragedy, such as in Portugal, where King John II, in one of the most gruesome chapters of this period, sent hundreds of Jewish children to a horrible death on the island of São Tomé.[20]

More broadly, Europeans often blamed the Jewish population when millions of people died from the Black Death and the plague. The common idiom "poisoning the well" is symbolic of the crime of which they were often accused.

The Roman Catholic record on antisemitism was also astoundingly horrendous. It could have been embodied in Luther's important debate opponent, Dr. Johann Eck.[21]

In one sense, Luther's conflict with the Jewish people was a war he never needed to wage. Yet it is one that he became obsessed with later in his life. According to Andrew Pettegree:

> … the Jews … had, until this point, occupied very little of Luther's attention. There were at this date relatively few Jews in Germany; Luther's own community in Wittenberg had expelled its Jewish population some ninety years before his arrival.[22]

But according to Kaufmann,

> Luther took pre-modern anti-Semitism for granted, adopted it, and helped to spread it. … 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.[23]

Sadly, antisemitism claimed no less than the great Greek scholar and translator Erasmus—apart from whose Greek New Testament text there would also have been no Reformation.[24] Anabaptist leader Balthasar Hubmaier had began as a virulent adversary of the Jewish people before his conversion.[25] And as for even one of the most irenic

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[20] See Henry Abramson; "When Jews Were 'Illegals,' They Took Away Our Children." Forward; 19 July 2018; https://forward.com/community/406188/when-jews-were-illegals-they-took-away-our-children/; Internet; accessed 1 September 2026.

[21] See Gritsch, pp. 27-28 for just one example. Gritsch also writes, "Luther is responsible for a significant part of a Christianity that, already in his time, was riddled by an irrational anti-Semitism, causing oppression that ranges from expulsion to murder." P. 30.

[22] Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation* (New Yor: Penguin Books, 2015), p. 295. Kaufmann states, "Very few instances of personal contact between Luther and Jews can be reconstructed with any certainty" (p. 26).

[23] Kaufmann, p. 4.

[24] See Gritsch, p. 24.

[25] See Gritsch, p. 25; Kaufmann, p. 18;

spirits of the Reformation, "the Strasbourg theologian Martin Bucer (1491-1551) recommended hard labor for Jews."[26]

No less a Reformation figure than the esteemed John Calvin also made horrible statements about the Jews. Barry Horner records:

> John Calvin, despite being more moderate than Luther on this point, nevertheless was rooted in the same essential Augustinian legacy. Although not going out of his way to harass Jews, he was content to keep them out of Geneva and repeat traditional anti-Judaic statements.[27]

The difference between Luther and Calvin on this point was one of intensity, not direction. Andy Woods states: "Although some claim that the same level of anti-Semitic vitriol is not found in the work of John Calvin as is found in the later writings of Luther, such a claim is without merit."[28]

Kaufmann opines:

> Taken as a whole, the Lutheran tradition of the sixteenth century was neither more hostile nor more favourable to the Jews than the Reformed or the Catholic traditions. The most one can say is that some 'radical' offshoots of the Reformation movement, the Anabaptists … were less hostile.[29]

Indeed, the very church where Luther would preach for more than three decades, St. Mary's or the so-called Town Church of Wittenberg, has a very famous anti-Jewish relief in the corner of the building called a Judensau (seen at right). Its meaning is self-explanatory and almost too perverse to describe. It had, in fact, been there for roughly two centuries when Luther took over the pulpit, and it is still there today—although a pro-Jewish plaque has been added to the churchyard to counter this sculpture and to explain its historical significance.[30]



[26] Gritsch, p. 26. One shining light in the Lutheran Reformation with regard to his attitude toward the Jewish people was Andreas Osiander, who supported Luther at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529 and the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. For his clashes with Eck, who was on the polar opposite side, see Gritsch, pp. 27-28, and Kaufmann, p. 73.

[27] Horner, p. 27.

[28] Andy Woods, "The Protestant Reformation: An Important and Yet Incomplete Hermeneutical Reformation," in Christopher Cone and James I. Fazio, gen. eds., p. 250.

[29] Kaufmann, p. 153.

[30] The German people have generally been committed to preserving many aspects of their very troubled history—for the sake of conserving irreplaceable items of significance and allowing people to learn from them. For Luther's 1543 statement about this horrendous piece of art, and additional information about it, see Gritsch, p. 92. Read the full text with commentary in Schramm and Stjerna, Text #24, "On the Ineffable Name and on the Lineage of Christ (1543)," pp. 177-180. For additional commentary, see Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross*, pp. 104-105; and Erwin W. Lutzer, *Rescuing the Gospel: The Story and Significance of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), p. 115.

The point here is simply that Luther did not commission this sculpture to be created, nor did he use his considerable influence in Wittenberg to have it demolished. The raw perversion of this relief demonstrates the world into which he was born, and in which he lived and ministered.

Such were the times of the Reformation. And the first and second generations of Reformers would rarely begin to make an indent on this front.

Luther's Writings

In an attempt to deal most effectively with this issue within the limited scope of this paper, we will focus primarily upon Luther's two most important writings on this theme.

The Early Luther—1523

Against the backdrop examined above, Luther's writing of 1523, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, is utterly astounding.

At its essence, this tract offered a defense of the Biblical truth of the virgin birth. In the process, however, Luther made several countercultural statements regarding the Jewish people.

Luther wrote this piece arguably at the zenith of his phenomenal writing ministry. Pettegree states: "At the end of 1520, he was the most prolific living author since the invention of printing seventy years before."[31]

One of the most famous statements in the treatise is this:

> I hope that if one deals in a kindly way with the Jews and instructs them carefully from Holy Scripture, many of them will become genuine Christians and turn again to the faith of their fathers, the prophets and patriarchs. They will only be frightened further away from it if their Judaism is so utterly rejected that nothing is allowed to remain, and they are treated only with arrogance and scorn.[32]

Perhaps an even more astonishing statement is found in the following understated irony, when Luther writes: "I beg my dear papists, should they be growing weary of denouncing me as a heretic, to seize the opportunity of denouncing me as a Jew."[33]

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[31] Pettegree, p. 115. 1520 was, of course, a banner year for Luther's writing ministry, as he had produced *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* and *The Freedom of a Christian*. The year of 1523 unfolded before the exceedingly problematic Peasants' War, but after Luther had pled for his own religious freedom, if you will, based on the operation of his own *conscience*, before Emperor Charles V at Worms in April of 1521—forcing him to hide in the Wartburg Castle for nearly a year. It was after he had returned to Wittenberg and consolidated his own authority as the leader of the Reformation, including the publication of his 1522 September Testament—the New Testament that he had translated from the original Greek into German in just 11 weeks during his stay in the Wartburg.

[32] Schramm and Stjerna, p. 78. Read the full text with commentary in Schramm and Stjerna, Text #7, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew (1523)," pp. 76-83.

[33] Ibid., p. 79.

Call me a Jew, Luther says, because, "He committed the Holy Scriptures, that is, the law and the prophets, to no nation except the Jews…."[34] That may be one of the most amazing statements Luther ever authored!

Gritsch offers the following commentary on Luther's groundbreaking work: "Luther blamed 'popishness' and 'monkery' for an anti-Semitism that treats Jews like dogs, derides them, and deprives them of their property."[35] Gritsch calls this "a treatise that discloses his most favorable attitude to the Jews."[36]

Christopher Probst states mildly: "*That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* (1523) was arguably philosemitic (for its era)."[37] Pettegree stated about it: "Luther's first utterance on the Jewish faith was, in marked contrast to Eck, extremely measured."[38]

According to "German Lutheran scholar Walther Bienert (1909-1994),"[39] "Luther became known as a 'protector of Jews' (*Judenbeschützer*) among Jews until 1540."[40] Kaufmann adds, "… his call for tolerance in *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew*, his work of 1523, may well have made him a positive figure in Jewish circles."[41]

Kaufmann writes further:

> 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.[42]

However, Kaufmann also has a uniquely negative view of this work, based on Luther's conditional statement "until I can see what effect I have had."[43] Kaufmann states regarding this caveat, "Most contemporaries ignored these words, as have virtually all scholars up to now."[44] For him, the significance of them is so great that he writes:

> … the content of *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew* not only accords with the unreservedly negative view of the Jews found in his earlier pronouncements, but can also be reconciled with the direction his policy towards them took from the mid-1530s onwards.[45]

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Gritsch, p. 63.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Christopher J. Probst, *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2012), p. 54.
[38] Pettegree, p. 295.
[39] Gritsch, p. 128.
[40] Ibid, p. 130.
[41] Kaufmann, p. 31. He states on p. 133, "… the early Luther was turned into a father of modern toleration towards the Jews" by Lutheran Pietism. See additional details on pp. 132-135.
[42] Ibid, p. 4.
[43] Ibid, p. 64. This is rendered "until I see what I have accomplished" in Schramm and Stjerna, p. 83.
[44] Kaufmann, p. 64.
[45] Ibid.

Kaufmann does concede, however, regarding "the one thing that was genuinely new about Luther, namely the call to tolerate the Jews and live together with them."[46]

While he is most famous for his teaching on Romans and Galatians, it is important to note that Luther loved the Hebrew Scriptures. According to Gritsch, "Luther's biblical research and teaching concentrated on the Old Testament, thus making him a 'Professor of Old Testament' by modern standards. His career of thirty-two years involved only three or four years as lecturer on the New Testament."[47]

On a related note, Gritsch describes how "in 1519, Luther asked [George] Spalatin to get the approval of Elector Federick for calling Matthew Hadrian, a converted Spanish Jewish Hebraist to the Wittenberg faculty."[48] He also writes how "Luther became acquainted with Bernhardus Gibbingnensis, a Jewish Hebraist who had converted in 1519 and studied at Wittenberg University."[49] Clearly, at least at this stage, Luther had no compunction about fellowshipping with Jewish people who embraced the Christian faith—even in positions of leadership. This would have been revolutionary in its time.

Reeves goes even further in offering the following commentary on Luther's 1523 masterpiece: "He dedicated it to a converted Jew he had befriended, whom he would later support financially (and whose son he would house) at great personal cost."[50]

Stjerna offers a conflicting report, however, about Luther's greatest pro-Jewish writing:

> In the wake of his 1523 treatise, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, Luther himself earned the reputation of being a friend of the Jews, and contemporary Jewish sources indicate that the German Jewish community looked upon Luther's movement with a degree of optimism as well. Luther made it clear in *Against the Sabbatarians* that this reputation was not welcomed. In this 1538 treatise, he goes to great lengths to demonstrate that his 1523 words had been misunderstood and misused.[51]

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[46] Ibid., p. 66.

[47] Gritsch, p. 33. He does note, however, that the New Testament was clearly the object of Luther's focus in his preaching ministry in church (p. 33-34).

[48] Ibid., p. 51.

[49] Ibid., p. 62. Gritsch notes, "In his best moments, Luther rebuked the anti-Semitic intolerance embedded in society and especially in the papal church…." (p. 139). Kaufmann supplies slightly different details on pp. 57 and 73-75.

[50] Michael Reeves, p. 64.

[51] Kirsi I. Stjerna, "The Jew in Luther's World," p. 32. In Luther's defense, it would seem it could be argued that 15 years is an exceedingly long time to wait to correct the record—and this was drawing perilously close to the time when Luther would unleash his final flood of anti-Jewish writings, in general. However, Dr. Mike Stallard also pointed out that he located evidence of an anti-Jewish statement from Luther, written in 1530. Here is Stallard's commentary on Luther's notes on Isa. 63:1-6: "… Luther, blinded as he was by his anti-Semitism, identified Edom as the 'ungodly synagogue,' meaning the Jews. The Edomites were 'red Jews' who are 'bloodthirsty and murderous.' Tragically, Luther went on to comment on the sprinkled blood of v. 3 with these words: 'every calamity of the Jews is for the sake of Christ.' He apparently saw the second coming of Christ as the final destruction of the Jewish people. … it is such statements about Jewish people (particularly from a biblical passage that actually promises the blessing of national salvation for Israel; cf. Isa. 63:7-9) that support the charge that Luther was anti-Semitic. He saw

Kaufmann's words offer a fitting conclusion to this section:

> … in his texts published in 1520/1 Luther broke with a tradition of dealing with the Jews in a way designed to marginalize or exclude them. His policy towards them ran counter to the main tendencies that had come to dominate discussions of the 'Jewish question' in the course of the later fifteenth century, particularly in the countries of western Europe, and had spread also to the German territories. Luther wanted to acquaint the Jews with the word of promise that had first been vouchsafed to them. …
>
> When the Wittenberg theology professor's fame was at its height, at the time and in the historical circumstances of the Diet of Worms, a range of comments spread over various of his writings inevitably made him appear to be a 'friend of the Jews', whose willingness to tolerate Jews within Christian society exceeded that of [Johannes] Reuchlin.[52]

The Later Luther—1543

As the year of 1543 was approaching, many things had changed in the 20 years since Luther penned *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*. His health was failing, and in three years he would be with His Lord, the One he had proclaimed so boldly, so often, for so long. The years of physical and psychological torment that Luther had imposed upon himself in the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, in the vain attempt of earning his salvation, had taken their toll—along with all the other stresses of life and ministry.

Lutzer speaks of "Luther's last days, when the irritability of age and disease took over."[53] And Kaufmann sets the stage as follows:

> In his later years, when he was plagued constantly by bodily ailments such as headaches, circulatory problems, and kidney stones, Luther's view of the world was marked by moroseness, pessimism, scepticism, and melancholy. Nowadays he might be regarded as suffering from 'age-related depression'.[54]

Here specifically is an additional factor to keep in mind, as Kaufmann describes it:

> Luther was working on his definitive written version of the 'final solution to the Jewish question' in the autumn of 1542, during a period of great sadness in his life. On the morning of 20 September 1542 his beloved daughter Magdalena, known affectionately as Lenchen, died at the age of thirteen. She had been a ray of sunshine in the 'black cloister' where the family lived. Luther had knelt at her bedside praying and weeping bitterly. She died in his arms.[55]

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only cursing and not blessing for Israel." Mike Stallard, "Isaiah 63:1-6: The Messianic Warrior Judge," in *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy* eds. Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2019), p. 998. Stallard states in his footnote no. 5 (p. 1,008): "Here Luther extravagantly uses the familial relationship of Jacob (Israel) and Esau (Edom) to apply statements about the latter to the former." Also, sadly, Gritsch notes: "Luther agreed with the decision of Elector John Frederick in 1536 to expel Jews from his territory." Gritsch, p. 69.

[52] Kaufmann, pp. 51-52.

[53] Lutzer, *Rescuing the Gospel*, p. 116. See also Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross*, p. 107.

[54] Kaufmann, p. 96.

[55] Ibid., p. 94.

Kaufmann then sums it all up in the most dramatic fashion:

> Luther's return to the mentality that produced his early hostility to the Jews clearly took place during a phase of his life overshadowed by mourning. He escaped from grief into work on his late 'Jewish writings'. In the autumn of 1542 he was disillusioned, weak and ill, despairing and broken. Death had touched his life as never before in a frightening and oppressive manner. Looking back at the position he had adopted with regard to the 'Jewish question' in 1523, he saw himself as having failed on a personal level. He had made himself 'guilty' and the road he had gone down by writing *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew* was evidence of his guilt. The devil's blows were raining down on him. Had his daughter also been taken from him because of this sin? Was he now obliged to fear being punished in hell for his call for compassion towards the Jews? It was his duty to live on in order to 'exculpate' himself.[56]

Eric Metaxas also writes frankly:

> At the very end of his life, after becoming a parody of his former cranky self, Luther said and wrote some things about the Jews that, taken on their own, make him out to be a vicious anti-Semite. The Nazis exploited these last writings to the utmost, as though they represented Luther's definitive take on the matter, which is impossible, given what he'd said earlier in his life.[57]

Kaufmann states about this later writing:

> It was the kind of dark phantasm provoked by a sense of fear and threat that was familiar in Late Medieval and Early Modern anti-Semitism and in *On the Jews and their Lies* Luther lent his considerable powers of expression to becoming its mouthpiece and advocate.[58]

We must also remember that Luther's horrible anti-Jewish statements in 1543 were not written in a theological vacuum, but flowed from the belief he expressed in that same year, when he said "[he did] not have any hope here," regarding the future restoration of Israel promised in Rom. 11:25-27, "*and do not have any Scripture for it*."[59]

Reeves writes: "Over the years, though, he detected what he saw as a hardness of heart in the unbelieving Jews, in that they refused to acknowledge that their own Scriptures pointed them clearly to Christ."[60]

"Since Luther expected the Last Day to be imminent, a conversion of Jews could be expected," notes Gritsch.[61] This was a great disappointment for Luther.

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[56] Kaufmann, p. 124.
[57] Metaxas, p. 92,
[58] Kaufmann, p. 114.
[59] "On the Shem Hamphoras and the Genealogy of Christ," 1543. From *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. (Weimar: Böhlaus, 1883-). 53, 580:3. As quoted in Gritsch, p. 41. Italics added by Gritsch; not found in original.
[60] Reeves, p. 64.
[61] Gritsch, p. 61. Luther's apocalyptic hope for Jewish conversion is fascinating, but outside the scope of this paper.

Reeves goes on to explain Luther's prescription for this dilemma, in context: "While he condemned personal acts of vengeance, he argued that then-standard blasphemy laws should be applied to the Jews, making their religion criminal."[62]

In fact, there were four specific groups that drew Luther's ire at this point late in his life.

Gritsch states: "In the late 1530s, Luther became increasingly convinced that Jews, besides Muslims (Turks), 'papists,' and unitarian (anti-Trinitarian) 'radicals,' were Satan's fifth column, trying to destroy the Christian foundations of the world."[63]

Luther's paranoia regarding how to deal with these, especially the *unbaptized* groups, was based in real fear—a fear that is completely distant from our time and circumstances today. Bienert well stated:

> But two un-Reformation (*unreformatorische*) motives seduced the later Luther into an anti-Jewish derailment: first, Luther's presumed (*vermeintlich*) responsibility as a guardian of dogma, then, the presumed governmental duty to protect the peaceful religious uniformity of the territorial church. … *It was not the reformer but the church politician Luther who showed himself as anti-Jewish in a specific historical situation. The reformer and the gospel he proclaimed are friendly to the Jews.*[64]

Reeves states:

> It is hard for a modern audience … to understand that these were, at the time, standard measures taken against heretics. Luther was arguing for the powers of the state to be applied to uphold Christianity. And, while his recommendations are repulsive, they had not come from a lack of spiritual concern. Concluding the work, he wrote: 'May Christ, our dear Lord, convert them mercifully and preserve us steadfastly and immovably in the knowledge of him, which is eternal life. Amen.[65]

What did Luther say that was so horrible? He began the infamous section of *On the Jews and Their Lies* with these words, "What shall we Christians do with this rejected

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[62] Reeves, p. 64. Herein is the essence of the problem that we must overcome in addressing these issues. The socio-political climate into which Luther was born, and even as it existed after the Reformation began to take hold, bears little resemblance to our modern culture, especially as it relates to freedom of religion. In his own lifetime, Luther could not grasp, and did not come to the point of advocating for, a free church. The Reformational Lutheran church was, indeed, the state church in areas where it was accepted. Luther bore the weight of fearing that any misstep he would make could leave Germany in tatters—in much worse shape than he was born into. Any group that interfered with the order of the state church was perceived as a frightful threat to that godly sense of stability. Two groups, in particular, posed an immediate threat—Jewish people and anabaptists (to whom he had once also been friendlier). What these two groups shared in common was abstaining from having their children baptized, and thus initiated into the church and society.

[63] Gritsch, p. 70.

[64] Walter Bienert, *Martin Luther und die Juden* (Frankfurt am Main: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1982), p. 148. As quoted in Gritsch, p. 129. Italics added by Gritsch.

[65] Reeves, p. 85

and condemned people, the Jews?"[66] He then advocated for seven ghastly responses, as summarized by Schramm and Stjerna:

1. Burn down Synagogues
2. Destroy Jewish homes
3. Confiscate Prayer Books and Talmudic writings
4. Forbid Rabbis to teach
5. Abolish safe-conduct for Jews
6. Prohibit Usury to the Jews
7. Enforce manual labor on the Jews[67]

Right off the top we note that several of these points made no rational sense. For instance, earlier in his life, "Luther opposed the burning of Jewish books just because they were written in Hebrew."[68]

But the normally fair-minded Philip Melanchthon was either unmoved by Luther's shocking rhetoric, or else afraid to voice his opinion. According to Kaufmann, "We know that on 17 January 1543 Melanchthon sent a printed copy of the work to Landgrave Philipp of Hesse with a note saying that it contained 'truly much useful teaching'."[69]

Attempts to see this treatise in the best light possible notwithstanding, this tract accomplished nothing for Luther, but has done inestimable harm to his legacy. Pettegree summarizes as follows:

> Of all Luther's writings none was more damaging to his later reputation, particularly in modern times, after these passages had been cited with such enthusiasm by the ideologues of National Socialism. Contemporary reaction was also decidedly tepid. Luther's friends were by now wearily familiar with the violent language with which he assailed the church's enemies, and this intemperance would reach new heights in the writings of these last years. But whereas the last tirades against the pope found eager readers, *On the Jews and Their Lies* did not. Published twice in Wittenberg, it was not reprinted elsewhere in the original German. Significantly, the authorities in Strasbourg, which by this date had become the largest Western center for reproductions of Luther's works, intervened to prevent publication, for fear of possible violence. The print history gives a clear indication that, whatever their momentous later consequences, these works were at the time regarded as minor.[70]

Gritsch agrees, stating: "The immediate effect of Luther's final attacks against the Jews was minimal."[71] He adds the following historical note: "The Swiss successor to Ulrich

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[66] Schramm and Stjerna, p. 175. Read the text with commentary in Schramm and Stjerna, Text #23, "On the Jews and Their Lies (1543)," pp. 164-176.
[67] Ibid., p. 165.
[68] Gritsch, p. 59.
[69] Kaufman, p. 106.
[70] Pettegree, pp. 297-298.
[71] Gritsch, p. 97.

Zwingli, Henry Bullinger, warned that Luther would be remembered as 'a man of inexcusable passions.'"[72]

Lutheran scholar Friedrich Lezius would later hold Luther accountable to his own standards when he said this regarding this discourse:

> It is obvious that Luther does not argue in concordance with the spirit of the New Testament and the Reformation…. The Protestant Church has therefore rejected the errors of the aging reformer as not binding for the church and only regards Luther's treatise "The Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," which was published in 1523, as a true expression of the spirit of the Reformation.[73]

Was Luther's Animosity Religious or Racial?

This question continues to be hotly debated, with Luther's staunchest allies insisting there was no hint of ethnic bias within him—only concern for the faith and the condition of the church-state relationship.

Metaxas states: "It's noteworthy that Luther's foulest condemnations of the Jews were never racial, but were stirred because of the Jews' indifference to his earlier offers to convert them."[74]

Lutzer adds: "His animosity was *religious*, not *racial*. There is nothing in his writings about the purity of blood, but rather the purity of doctrine. The fact that the Jews rejected Christ made him angry."[75]

Reeves observes regarding *On the Jews and Their Lies*:

> Undoubtedly it contains horrible material that one wishes he had died before writing. However, not only was it written long after his Reformation breakthrough, after a change of heart toward the Jews (meaning that it is entirely inappropriate to tar all his theology with its brush), but also, the caricature is a distortion. There was no racism involved.[76]

But Kaufmann maintains: "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."[77]

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[72] Ibid.

[73] Lezius said that Luther's horrific words were "clearly contrary to the spirit of the Gospel," and he got to the heart of the issue that allowed for Luther's excesses when he called Luther "the mighty man." "Luther's Attitude as Regards the Jews," 1892. Quoted in Johannes Wallman, "The Reception of Luther's Writings on the Jews from the Reformation to the End of the 19th Century." In Harold H. Ditmanson, ed., *Stepping-Stones to Further Jewish-Lutheran Relations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), pp. 135-36. Reprint in *The Lutheran Quarterly*, I (Spring 1987): 72-97. As quoted in Gritsch, p. 109.

[74] Metaxas, p. 94.

[75] Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross*, p. 107. Italics in original.

[76] Reeves, p. 84.

[77] Kaufmann, p. 4. Kaufmann here displays his own antagonism to orthodox Christianity.

Probst is very clear in his condemnation of Luther's later writings about the Jewish people, stating, "… *On the Jews and Their Lies* may be said to contain *both* anti-Judaic and antisemitic rhetoric."[78]

Gritsch explains just how damaging this was, when he writes:

> Luther's anti-Semitism represents the dark underside of his life and work because it dimmed the light of the gospel he rediscovered as part and parcel of the ancient covenant between God and Abraham. The riddle of anti-Semitism seemed to overwhelm Luther. Although he struggled out of a slanderous medieval ecclesiastical system, he became the victim of a virulent anti-Semitism and manifested some of its worst features.[79]

Yet Probst states, "No amount of anti-Judaic and antisemitic theological writing—no matter how harsh or deprecating—could have led by itself to the mass murder of Jews in Nazi Germany."[80]

And Kaufmann summarizes the issue well, stating:

> 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.[81]

Conclusion

Metaxas offers a perfect way to focus toward our conclusion, and his words should be obvious after this brief survey: "… when it came to the Jews, Luther's legacy is confusing, not to say deeply disturbing."[82]

Moulton and Marsh also offer a fitting summation to this entire conundrum,

> … Luther is still to be held responsible for his own anti-Jewish remarks published in the last three years of his life. While various reasons have been proffered in an effort to help audiences today better understand the cause of his statements, they are, in the end, simply inexcusable.[83]

Even the great biographer Bainton wrote: "One could wish that Luther had died before ever this tract was written."[84]

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[78] Probst, p. 12.
[79] Gritsch, p. 141.
[80] Probst, p. 12.
[81] Kaufmann, p. 9.
[82] Metaxas, p. 91.
[83] Brian Moulton and Cory M. Marsh, "How Dispensational Thought Corrects Luther's View of Israel" (ch. 7), Cone and Fazio, gen. eds., p. 190.
[84] Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1950), p. 379. As quoted in Gritsch, 123.

Reeves even states regarding *On the Jews and Their Lies*: "… it is enough for many to dismiss Luther as an odious anti-Semite, and all his theology as fatally tainted."[85]

The challenge for contemporary historians and theologians is that we cannot evaluate this complex medieval character entirely in the context of a 20th-century Holocaust which took place almost four centuries after he died, nor can we judge him with unjust scales. And we must also not fail to remember the positive contributions he made in his dealings with the Jewish people. Yet, to offer even these simple caveats may sound horribly callous to some.[86]

So here is an interesting academic question to ponder: How would Luther have responded, and what would he have advocated for the Jewish people, if he had lived in the days of Hitler and the Nazis?

Of course, there is no authoritative answer to this question. Many of us hope, however, with good reason, that Luther in his prime, with his health and faculties intact, would certainly have stood with Dietrich Bonhoeffer[87] in opposition to the Führer.

Lutzer is convinced, stating: "We can be quite sure that if Luther had lived in Hitler's day, he not only would have opposed Hitler's racially motivated hatred of the Jews but would have also condemned the Führer as Antichrist."[88]

There is no evidence that Luther ever adopted Hitler's demonic perversions regarding the Jewish people, based on their ethnicity. It seems inconceivable that the man who took the boldest stand imaginable against Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at Worms in April of 1521 would not have opposed Hitler in the same way.

But, as Kaufmann notes generally about the Reformer's influence regarding the Jewish people, "Today Luther scholars are as divided as ever on this matter."[89]

But Gritsch's final "*Conclusion*" is also clear:

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[85] Reeves, p. 64.

[86] Probst's work is perhaps the most detailed and authoritative survey available which traces Luther and his legacy and influence, showing the effect he had on Lutheran leaders in Germany during the Holocaust. Alternatively, Gritsch writes, "In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, some studies become entangled with ideology, especially during the reign of German National Socialism ('Nazism')," p. 128.

[87] Shirer writes about "… Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a descendant of eminent Protestant clergymen on both sides of his family, who regarded Hitler as Antichrist and who believed it a Christian duty to 'eliminate him.'" (p. 374). Bonhoeffer's view of Hitler here parallels Luther's view that the pope was the Antichrist. Gritsch also writes: "Luther quotations were used in opposition to Nazi anti-Semitism by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyr of the 'Confessing Church' (*Bekennende Kirche*) movement in Germany" (p. 117). See also Kaufmann, p. 7, who shows how Bonhoeffer emphasized Luther's view "that if Jews converted they were to be treated as full members of the congregation and community, a view that could not be reconciled with the introduction of the Aryan Paragraph into the realm of the church." Bonhoeffer's authority here was Luther's 1546 work, *Warning Against the Jews*.

[88] Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross*, pp. 106-107.

[89] Kaufmann, p. 5.

> *Luther's anti-Semitism is an integral part of his life and work, clearly evidenced in his literary legacy. But his anti-Semitism is neither in harmony with the core of his theology nor with the stance of the Apostle Paul regarding the relationship between Jews and Christians. Consequently, Luther's attitude to the Jews is against his better judgment.*[90]

So then, how do we respond to this whole controversy? Some, who love Luther, answer that question by dwelling on all the positive aspects of his life and glossing over these most difficult issues. On the other end of the spectrum are those who use Luther's horrible end-of-life indiscretions to totally discredit the man.

If we want to handle this subject responsibly, with the gravity it deserves, neither of these approaches is satisfactory. Yet, we also realize that it is unlikely that anyone will ever devise a solution that will nicely solve the case.

But for the sake of attempting serious scholarship, I believe it is incumbent upon me to formulate and offer my own best conclusions to the matter. Here are the points I propose:

- Luther's rediscovery of the gospel transformed history and, humanly speaking, led to a chain of events that allow me to present this very paper. Under God, Luther was instrumental in turning the signal passage of the New Testament on the nature of the gospel (Rom. 1:16-17) into the central passage of all of church history.
- I believe that Luther's Augustinian commitment to seeing the church as a replacement for Israel in God's program ultimately dulled his conscience toward the Jewish people, and blurred his senses regarding their future.
- Luther's late collapse regarding the Jewish people—as well as any earlier indiscretions he may have demonstrated—are not a basis for discrediting his entire life, ministry and body of work. We must judge his words and actions in the context of his day, and we must also weigh our verdict of his life by Biblical standards. Many Biblical characters experienced failures on a level that equaled or exceeded Luther's (see Num. 20:1-13; Mark 14:66-72), yet we still regard them as heroes of the faith (see Heb. 11:23-29; 1 Pet. 5:1).
- *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* largely remains a wonderful, countercultural expression of Christian love for—and even identity with—the Jewish people.
- *On the Jews and Their Lies* will always serve as a reprehensible reminder of the hatred that so many in the world and, sadly, the church have felt toward the Jewish people for centuries—culminating in the Holocaust in Germany.
- Luther's life, in addition to all the other purposes it serves, provides a template for discerning one's response to the Jewish people. Are we living with Luther in 1523—or 1543? Do we protect and befriend God's Chosen People, while also patiently and respectfully praying for and seeking their salvation in their very own Messiah—or do we assist those who would facilitate their destruction?

[90] Gritsch, p. 138. Italics in original.

- If Luther would have ministered in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, I believe I know where he would have stood with regard to the Jewish people—and that is just where he should have, opposing Hitler and the Nazis at every turn.

Joachim Rogge's words provide a fitting closing:

> In the final analysis, we adhere not to Luther but to Holy Scripture – as he intended! – and be corrected by it, together with others. In this way, we will learn, after the experience of the unspeakable suffering of the Jews, to abandon any quick mission aiming at conversion.[91]

Benediction

God *is* our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear,
Even though the earth be removed,
And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.
The Lord of hosts *is* with us;
The God of Jacob *is* our refuge. *Selah* (Ps. 46:1-2, 11)

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Photo of the Wittenberg Town Church is by Paul J. Scharf.

[91] Joachim Rogge, "Luther Stellung zu den Juden," *Luther – Zeitschrift der Luther-Gesellschaft* 40 (1969): 24. As quoted in Gritsch, p. 124, with this explanation: "Text of a presentation at the 485th birthday of Luther and the 30th anniversary of the *Kristallnacht* on November 9, 1968, in the church of St. Peter and Paul in Eisleben where Luther had been baptized."