Luther and the Jews

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The problem posed by Luther's writings on the Jews, as is well-known, is that there is a radical change in Luther's attitude toward and counsel for treatment of the Jews between the treatise of 1523 and that of 1543. We must review this briefly. In 1523 Luther wrote the shorter of the two treatises, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew." The immediate occasion for this treatise was that Luther was charged among other things with teaching that Jesus was not conceived by the Holy Spirit, but rather of the seed of Joseph, and that Mary was not a virgin and had many sons after Christ. The first part of the treatise is devoted to proving that Jesus was a Jew, born of the seed of Abraham, but nevertheless, in fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament, born of a virgin, begotten by means of a miracle, and, there being no concrete scriptural evidence to the contrary, that Mary must have remained a virgin thereafter. The second part of the treatise is devoted to the Jews. There he says that while he is on the subject, he wants not only to refute those who had charged him with error, but also "to do a service to the Jews on the chance that we might bring some of them back to their own true faith, the one which their fathers held."[1] To do that Luther suggests "for the benefit of those who want to work with them a method and some passages from Scripture which they should employ in dealing with them."[2] What follows is an attempt to prove from certain Old Testament passages (principally Genesis 49:10-12 and Daniel 9:24-27) that only Jesus Christ could be considered to fit the role of the true Messiah. He concludes the treatise by offering some advice as to how Christians should approach and treat Jews. Theologically, they should not seek first to convince Jews that Jesus is true God, but rather that as man he is the true Messiah, and that only subsequently may they come to see him also as true God. Practically, he counsels that Christians should

deal gently with Jews according to the law of Christian love. Since this is of importance here, perhaps we should quote the passage in full:

> Therefore, I would request and advise that one deal gently with them and instruct them from Scripture; then some of them may come along. Instead of this we are trying only to drive them by force, slandering them, accusing them of having Christian blood if they don't stink, and I know not what other foolishness. So long as we thus treat them like dogs, how can we expect to work any good among them? Again, when we forbid them to labor and do business and have any human fellowship with us, thereby forcing them into usury, how is that supposed to do them any good?
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> 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. We must receive them cordially, and permit them to trade and work with us; that they may have occasion and opportunity to associate with us, hear our Christian teaching, and witness our Christian life. If some of them should prove stiff-necked, what of it? After all, we ourselves are not all good Christians either.
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> Here I will let the matter rest for the present, until I see what I have accomplished. God grant us all his mercy. Amen.[3]

The last sentence of that treatise, indicating Luther's intention to let the matter rest with what he has said, "for the present, until I see what I have accomplished," is no doubt a foreboding one in the light of subsequent writings, especially the second treatise with which we are principally concerned, "On the Jews and Their Lies," written in 1543. Here Luther's attitude and counsel seems to have changed radically. He states at the outset that he had made up his mind not to write anything further about or against the Jews. One could wish, of course, that he had stuck to his resolve. However, the immediate cause which impelled him to write, he says, was that reports had come to him that some Christians were being attracted to Judaism. Thus, he says, "I have published this little book, so that I might be found among those who opposed such poisonous activities of the Jews and who warned the Christians to be on their guard against them."[4] Thus, the stated purpose of the work is to warn Christians who might be attracted to Judaism about "the lies" of the Jews. It is not his purpose, he says, to quarrel with the Jews, nor to learn from them how they interpret Scripture, since, he thinks, he knows that

already. Nor is it his purpose to convert the Jews, since, he says, that is impossible.[5] Just in what sense he meant that is difficult to say, since even in this treatise he does continue to recognize that the Christian church is made up of both Jews and Gentiles,[6] and expresses the hope that by the measures proposed still a few might be saved.[7] He counsels Christians not to engage in much debate with Jews about the articles of faith, since, he says, "From their youth they have been so nurtured with venom and rancor against our Lord that there is no hope until they reach the point where their misery finally makes them pliable and they are forced to confess that the Messiah has come, and that he is our Jesus."[8] So the treatise, addressed to Christians, seems to be marked by much more pessimism about the prospect of converting the Jews than had been the earlier treatise. Just what the reasons for this change in attitude might have been, if indeed it is a change, is a question which has occupied both Jewish and Christian scholars, about which we shall have something to say later.

At any rate, with unparalleled invective and bitterness, Luther sets about in the treatise to expose "the lies" of the Jews, and to make his proposals for what to do about it. In so doing he draws upon the anti-Jewish polemic of medieval exegesis and superstition plus some, no doubt, jaundiced accounts of Jewish beliefs and practices written by converted Jews and perhaps a Jewish apologetic treatise which had come to his attention, but has not since been identified.[9] All this is heightened to a fever pitch by Luther's use of language, so the overall effect, even to one somewhat used to his use of language, is embarrassing and, especially in the light of subsequent use or even misuse of the treatise, appalling. As said previously, one can only wish that it had not been written. But, of course, it has been written and, indeed, translated into English, so now it can only be used as an occasion for self-examination theologically and attitudinally in the attempt, in some small measure at least, to undo what has been done. We shall have to say more about that later.

It is, I think, necessary to give some brief resume of the argument of the treatise and its proposals before we proceed to attempt to account for the change in Luther's stance from the earlier treatise.

When one looks beneath all the bitter language, the "lies" which Luther seeks to warn against are, I think, basically three. First, there was the claim on the part of the Jews to be the elect people of God by virtue of circumcision and lineage. Second, there was the messianic question which was already treated in the earlier writing. The "lie" for Luther was that Jesus was not the Messiah. Both of these questions, it should perhaps be remarked here, were of extreme existential moment to Luther because of his own struggles with the question of predestination and election. Since he saw in the incarnate One of the cross and resurrection the solution to the problem of election and predestination, this was an exceedingly touchy issue. As he had put it in his argument with Erasmus, "The Christian's chief and only comfort in every adversity lies in knowing that God does not lie . . ."[10] The third "lie" that Luther talks about was what he considered to be the public and official slandering of persons, of Jesus as a person, of Mary, and of Christians for believing in "three Gods," and so on. In my rereading of the treatise, it seems to me that, if anything, it is this that provided the new element which fired his wrath. Luther, whether through misinformation or simple predisposition to believe the reports that came to him, had been led to believe that Jews were publically, officially, liturgically slandering Christ and Mary in the synagogues and in "official" teachings. This, I think, was the new thing that he had "discovered" between this and the earlier treatise. If the entire treatise is read in this light, it begins to "make more sense," if one can say that. The treatise is sprinkled throughout with references to that fact, namely, that in their prayers and in their synagogues the Jews make light of, not to say blaspheme, Christ and the Christian faith. I have not had the time to research the matter adequately, but it seems to me that it was this more than anything else that poisoned and colored his attitude toward Judaism as a whole, i.e., as an ethnic or religious group, rather than merely individuals. That is to say, Luther was apparently willing to tolerate differences in the interpretation of Scripture and to argue the matter on that level, and also individual or "private" differences, perhaps even slander. But it seems that for him, blasphemy or slander as an official and public position taught in the synagogues and inculcated in the homes was a different matter. That made him

tremble. Anyone who knows Luther knows that he was one who genuinely feared the wrath of God. He genuinely feared tolerating or allowing blasphemy as a public or official position, because to do so was to become implicated in it. Thus, it seems to me that a key statement in this treatise is one that comes from the section where he is suggesting the measures that he thinks ought to be taken against the Jews:

> For whatever we tolerated in the past unknowingly—and I myself was unaware of it—will be pardoned by God. But if we, now that we are informed, were to protect and shield such a house for the Jews, existing right before our very nose, in which they lie about, blaspheme, curse, vilify, and defame Christ and us (as was heard above), it would be the same as if we were doing all this and even worse ourselves, as we very well know.[11]

The passage itself indicated that he is here responding to something he had previously been unaware of, and that this made all the difference for him.

Seen in this light, Luther's advice to the authorities on what to do about it becomes, if not less offensive or bearable to modern ears, at least more explicable. He advised, as is well-known, seven steps. It is important to notice—what also seems strange to modern ears—that he did not view this as Christians avenging themselves against the Jews. "We dare not avenge ourselves," he says. "Vengeance a thousand times worse than we could wish them ..." is already in effect.[12] He recommends first the burning of synagogues, so that, as he puts it, "...God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son and of his Christians."[13] Second, also that their houses be "razed and destroyed," because in them they pursue the same aims as in their synagogues.[14] Third, that all prayerbooks and Talmudic writings in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught be taken from them. Fourth, that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb. Fifth, that safe-conduct be forbidden them. Sixth, that usury be forbidden, and seventh, that young Jews be put to agrarian tasks "to earn their bread in the sweat of their brow." Later, he avers that if the authorities are not willing to do this, Jews should be exiled from the country.

Shocking and offensive measures indeed, at least to modern ears. It is important to note, however, that for Luther, at least, the measures were not to be imposed as a means for Christians to avenge themselves on Jews, but rather to avoid being implicated in blasphemy and so to evoke the wrath of God. Luther, it should be noted, does not advocate doing bodily harm to the Jews. The proposals, shocking and radical in the extreme and by no means to be excused, should nevertheless be seen in the light of the times. It was apparently difficult, if not impossible, for people of the time to conceive of a state with a plurality of religious views. Even the humanist, Thomas More, celebrated in our time as "the man for all seasons," wrote in his *Utopia* that anyone who did not believe in the principles of natural religion should be exiled. Exile was apparently thought of as the more "humane" solution to the problem of plurality. It was at least an advance over execution and inquisition. Where Luther does exceed the counsel of the times in advocating burning of synagogues and homes, etc., it is the problem of public slander that seems to be exercising him.

The advice given to pastors is consonant with this. Luther admonishes them to warn their parishioners concerning their eternal harm, to "be on guard against the Jews and avoid them so far as possible."[15] He insists, however, that they should not curse or harm their persons.[16] Pastors should rather remind the lords and rulers of their office to force the Jews to work, to forbid usury and check their blasphemy and cursing.

Luther viewed all this, as is also well-known, as exercising a "sharp mercy" to be practiced with "prayer and the fear of God" "... to see whether we might save at least a few from the glowing flames."[17] He apparently feared that his former counsel to deal gently with the Jews could be construed as tolerating public and open blasphemy. As stated previously, he genuinely feared that the wrath of God would descend, now that he knew, supposedly, what the situation was. As the Jewish scholar, Reinhold Lewin, already quite correctly saw in 1910 in his treatise, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden*, these were matters that cut to the heart of Luther's religious experience, by which Luther felt driven virtually against his will.[18] As Lewin put it, the words with which Luther closes the treatise were no mere empty

phrases, but heartfelt confessions, welling up out of Luther's deepest depths:[19]

> The wrath of God has overtaken them. I am loath to think of this, and it has not been a pleasant task for me to write this book, being obliged to resort now to anger, now to satire, in order to avert my eyes from the terrible picture which they present. It has pained me to mention their horrible blasphemy concerning our Lord and his dear mother, which we Christians are grieved to hear. I can well understand what St. Paul means in Romans 10 (9:2) when he says that he is saddened as he considers them. I think that every Christian experiences this when he reflects seriously, not on temporal misfortunes and exile which the Jews bemoan, but on the fact that they are condemned to blaspheme, curse, and vilify God himself and all that is God's, for their eternal damnation, and that they refuse to hear and acknowledge this but regard all of their doings as zeal for God. O God, heavenly Father, relent and let your wrath over them be sufficient and come to an end, for the sake of your dear Son! Amen.[20]

Attempts to Deal with the Treatises

Now the question is, what are we to do, or to make of Luther's treatises? For the most part, theological essays dealing with the treatises have busied themselves with attempts to explain or account for the shocking transformation in Luther's attitude toward the Jews from the earlier to the late treatises. It is not possible, nor perhaps even necessary, for us here to go into any extended consideration of those attempts. They are summarized adequately, I think, in the articles by Aarne Siirala and Kurt Meier. [See the editor's note, below.] But perhaps it is to the point to attempt a hurried classification of the attempts and to point up some of the problems raised since this will have a bearing on our own discussion and hopes to come to some understanding of where we might go from here. Basically, those who have been concerned with the question have tried to answer, I think, two questions: Why did Luther change his mind toward the Jews? and, What was the nature of this change? Why did Luther change from the one who had suggested stretching out a friendly hand to the Jews in the spirit of Christian love to one who advocates burning synagogues? Was it simply the traditional anti-Semitism of the medieval tradition now taking its toll in his old

age? I think not simply. He had all that from the beginning and in spite of it advocated something quite in advance of his age in the early treatise. Why then the change? That is the difficult question. There have been, I think it possible to say, three types of answers to these questions. There have been first those who have maintained that the change in Luther was of what might be called a psychological or attitudinal sort, due either to his increasing pessimism about the prospect of converting the Jews or perhaps also to the kind of thing that comes upon a man of Luther's makeup due to advancing age, increasing illness, and so on. Secondly, there have been those, principally Lutherans, I think, who have held that there was really no theological change in Luther's attitude throughout, and that Luther's objection to the Jews should be viewed entirely in a theological light. The only change, therefore, was in the area of what might be called practical strategy from a "gentle" to a "sharp mercy." A third and more recent theory, although in some ways old, as well, is that there was a theological change from the younger to the old Luther, a change, perhaps, in his view of election, and with it also a change in his view of the church.

There are, I think, difficulties with all of these views. In general, taking all the views together, for a Lutheran especially, whenever such theories of "change" are introduced, one is faced with the question of which "Luther" is to be accepted and then, having decided that, to explain away the "other" Luther without coping seriously enough with the problem that "other" Luther represents. In other words, rationalization becomes too easy. There are, of course, problems with each view in particular. One of the basic difficulties with the first view, which posits a psychological or attitudinal change due to perhaps increasing pessimism over the prospect of converting the Jews, has been that it could be, and indeed was, turned to the advantage of the Nazi or "German Christian" theologians in the "Third Reich." Reinhold Lewin, the Jewish scholar, is the one who first set forth this kind of thesis in what was the first modern "Wissenschaftlicher" treatment of the subject in 1910 which has apparently set the general tenor for the discussion ever since. What he says, basically, is that Luther's knowledge of the Jews in the early

years was of a more purely academic or "bookish" type. In the first blooming of the Reformation, he seems to think, Luther had some confidence that now that the gospel is being preached without all the trappings of medieval scholastic nonsense, the Jews might be able to hear it and be converted. Thus, against this background, Luther counsels treating the Jews gently. As time goes on, however, Luther's disappointing contacts with actual Jews, with rabbinic exegesis, as well as with "Judaizing" movements in Christian circles, leads him to change his attitude until in the end he comes to the conclusion that Jews cannot be converted and thus in his old age writes his scurrilous attacks on the Jews. One major difficulty with this, of course, is that it tends to leave some of the basic theological questions out of the account. It was all too easy, therefore, for the German Christian theologians to pick this up and say that whereas the "young" Luther was basically a naive theologian, immersed in his books, the "older" Luther, who had gained some experience with actual Jews, was led to change his mind. Thus, the tragedy that they could appeal to or use Luther for the horrors of the Nazi program quite apart from the theological questions involved.

The basic difficulty with the second thesis, that Luther's theological stance toward the Jews remained the same throughout, and that the only "change" was a question of the practical measures to be taken in view of the then existing situation, or hopes to convert them, the relationships between state and church, and so forth, is, as Aarne Siirala points out, that it can all too easily be used as a rationalization, especially for Lutherans. It is indeed, I think, quite possible to show that *theologically* Luther's stance remained pretty much the same throughout, from the early psalm lectures to the later works, and that Luther's general attitude toward the Jews was rooted in a basic theological position. But the task then would have to be that rather than using this theological position as a rationalization to go on and ask the more ultimate question, to wit: if this theological position could lead to such tragic results, such tragic change in practical recommendation, was there something inherently wrong with it to begin with? That is, could it be said that Luther simply imbibed what has been referred to as the "traditional" anti-Semitism of Christian theology or theologians? Or perhaps even to ask whether

any theological position, however valid, is in and of itself adequately protected against misuse.

The third thesis, that Luther's thought manifests some basic *theological* shifts from the earlier to the later period is designed, it is to be supposed, to take up this question. Thus, it is held that Luther's later writings on the Jews indicates a change perhaps in his understanding of the church, and also perhaps in his doctrine of election, since he, in those writings, begins to speak of "the Jews" as an ethnic or religious group and to deny to them the possibility of conversion, quite contrary, supposedly, to what Paul says in Romans 9-11. The difficulty with this thesis is that it poses, once again, the question of which "Luther" is now to be considered "acceptable." If Luther before the great writings of the 1520s and the early treatise, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," was anti-Jewish, and then went into a period when he seems to have been more open to the Jews, but then after 1526 or so seems to have relapsed once again into a more anti-Jewish attitude, does this mean that only the Luther of about 1520 to 1526 is to be considered acceptable? It seems to me that this move too tends to make the problem too easy and may be simply a means whereby one might avoid some of the fundamental issues. It is all too easy to "pick" a Luther with whom one might agree and still leave some of the basic theological problems untouched.

How is one to view all these attempts to account for the "change" in Luther's attitude? It seems to me that if what was said earlier in this paper is true, that what really animated Luther was his fear that the wrath of God would descend upon a church which tolerated open and public blasphemy, this tends to shed a quite different light on the whole matter. As I have indicated, I have not yet had sufficient time to check all the secondary literature to see if this has been noticed before. What reading I have done indicates that it has not. It also seems to me that it can quite easily be corroborated from Luther's own utterances within as well as outside of his late writings on the Jews. Lewin, for instance, notes that in his Table Talks, Luther in his later years returns more and more to the question of the Jews, suggesting that they be driven from the land. The reason given is the slander against Christ and Mary.[21]

Now, if this is the case, it seems to me that the various theories about the reasons for the "change" in Luther's attitude are somewhat beside the point, although there may be, of course, a grain of truth in each of them. One need not, however, I think, search hither and yon for the reasons for Luther's change in attitude, since the reasons are stated quite clearly in the treatises themselves. As is often the case with Luther's polemical writings one becomes so put off and offended by his use of language that one fails to listen to what he is actually saying. Undoubtedly that is one of his faults as a polemical writer. Nevertheless he says quite clearly, as already noted, that he had become aware of something which was previously unknown to him, and that this had to do with what he thought was public, official slander and blasphemy taught in the synagogues, inculcated through the writings and in the homes of the Jews, and that he feared toleration would bring down the wrath of God upon those who allowed such to continue.

(Speaking more personally, if I may be allowed that privilege, I think that perhaps one reason, at least, for Luther's anger and vituperative use of language in all of this was that he felt he had been misused or misled in this question. Luther most often reacts in that fashion when that is the case. He probably felt that he had reached out a hand to the Jews across the chasm of centuries of tragic bitterness and gotten it bitten. The much discussed incident of the visit to Luther of three Jews which Luther himself often mentions and repeats in "On the Jews and Their Lies" indicates this. Luther recounts how three learned Jews came to him "hoping to discover a new Jew in me because we were beginning to read Hebrew here in Wittenberg, and remarking that matters would soon improve since we Christians were starting to read their books." He reports that they debated and that the Jews gave them their "glosses" as they usually do, but when he tried to force them back to the text, they took refuge in rabbinical exegesis, "as do the Pope and the doctors" with their traditions. Nevertheless, they seem to have parted amicably, each expressing the hope for the conversion of the other. Luther apparently agreed even to give them a letter of recommendation to the authorities, asking that for Christ's sake they be allowed freely to go on their way. The mention of Christ in the letter apparently did

not sit well with the Jews, however, and Luther reports that when he later found out that they had supposedly called Christ a *tola*, a hanged highwayman, he did not wish henceforth to have anything to do with any Jew.[22] No doubt researchers have tended to make more of that incident than it deserves, but it does indicate, I think, that Luther apparently felt he had been ill-used and that this evoked his bitterness. It also indicates, I think, that it was not a difference in theological stance or opinion, aggravating as that might be, that fired his anger, but rather the question of slander. It further indicates how difficult it was to bridge the chasm which centuries of ill will had opened up and that Luther was perhaps all too naively unaware of, or insensitive to, the bitterness that centuries of Christian maltreatment has worked upon the Jews.)

What all of this means, it seems to me, is that Luther in his later writings on the Jews was concerned with a quite specific kind of problem, the question of what he thought was public and official blasphemy and its relationship to the wrath of God. He was not in those writings directly concerned, that is to say, with the question of the conversion of the Jews as such. I don't know that he was ever so optimistic about that—at least to the extent that failure would have evoked such bitterness. If he had grown more pessimistic about such a prospect, it was no doubt, because through abortive contacts with Jews and a greater acquaintance with the literature, of whatever sort, and perhaps his predilection to believe such literature, especially that of "converted" Jews, no doubt, he had come to believe that Jews were being taught in such fashion as to make such conversion highly improbable, if not impossible. Nor was there, I think, a major theological shift of any remarkable dimensions. It was simply that he became more and more worried, apparently, as time went on about the question of blasphemy and the prospect of the wrath of God. Whether this has to do with advancing old age and illness is, of course, difficult to say. He was, of course, fully as worried about the wrath of God in his youth as he was in his old age. The wrath of God was not for him, as it might be for many, an abstraction, but a very real thing. It is significant to note, I suppose, that even at that, if one is to take him at his word, he had resolved to write nothing further about the Jews. What finally impelled him to write that last

tragic piece, he says, was that certain Christians were being attracted to Judaism. Thus, he says, he is writing for Christians, not to the Jews, warning Christians, I suppose one might say, of the "wrath to come." So he concludes the treatise by saying, "I have done my duty. Now let everyone see to his. I am exonerated."[23]

Some Preliminary Theological Reflections

Now then, the question for us is what are we to do with Luther today? What is one to say finally about Luther and the Jews? Is Luther, so to speak, to be excommunicated—at least, perhaps, the older Luther? Are his later writings on the Jews to be put on some kind of index? These are the kinds of questions which trouble especially Lutherans today. And what I have to say in what follows is something by way of preliminary reflections on such questions—preliminary both because it seems to me that the problems are of such sort that I could not begin to deal adequately with them here, and because I am not sure I have as yet been able to "wrap my mind" around them, so to speak. It seems to me though that the problems raised are of an eminently theological sort of a very pressing nature indeed. I do not think that we have yet begun to deal with them in an adequate manner. So I offer the following by way of preliminary observations.

First, what of Luther's writings on the Jews? The first thing that has to be done, it seems to me, is to attempt to understand them—to understand them, if nothing else, as part of the tragedy of Jewish-Christian relationships, poisoned by centuries of acrimony, for which Christians, no doubt, bear a major share of the blame. Personally, I do not think that church pronouncements to the effect that Luther was "without defense" in what he said or did, however necessary or useful they might be in a preliminary way, to be of much final use. This is not because I wish to exonerate Luther for the part he has played in the horrible tragedy—no one should attempt that—but rather for two, I think, more important reasons. First, because that makes it too easy for us to distance ourselves from him and then congratulate ourselves that we have now, supposedly, arrived at a much more liberal and enlightened stance; and second, because it tends to foreshorten and obscure the theological issues

that were, and perhaps still are, involved. We have not, I think, paid our debt to history merely by announcing our "shock" at Luther's language and his supposed "prejudice" in his later years. We must search for the *reasons* if we are in any way to come to grips with the problems. It is all too easy to attempt to make a scapegoat of a historical figure on the assumption that what animated such a one was pretty much the same sort of "prejudice" that has animated others before or since. It has to be said, I think, that at least as far as Luther was concerned, that would not be entirely accurate. He did do what many others had not done before or have done since. He did reach out a hand, however naively or tentatively, to bridge the chasm of separation. His earlier writing and even his contacts with Jews stand witness to that. What he wanted was that discussion of the issues should begin and be carried forward in as open a manner as possible on the basis of the plain text of Scripture. That he was not able to carry through on that belongs to the tragedy of his own particular time and perhaps his own particular impatience and perhaps also to insufficient working through of some of his own theological principles—as we shall suggest a bit later.

The second thing to be said, I think, about Luther's writings on the Jews, and here it is especially the later ones that come under consideration, is that if the stated reason Luther had for writing them is as we have suggested, then that reason no longer exists, of course, and the treatise is *in no way* to be used to apply to any contemporary situation. It is imperative to state this clearly, it seems to me, even though it may be self-evident, so the treatise not be used again in any way to stoke the fires of Christian hatred of Jews. The treatise must be seen in the light of Luther's own particular theological anxiety and his own historical circumstances.

Third, it seems to me that our basic difficulties lie on a deeper theological level quite apart from the writings themselves. This is signaled even in the treatises themselves by his theology of the wrath of God. Luther was one for whom, as we have said, the wrath of God was no abstraction. That laid him existentially open, I think it can be said, to the traditional Christian polemic that Jews were suffering under the wrath of God because of the crucifixion of Christ, and indeed, because of supposed continued slander of Christ,

Mary, and the church. In Luther, precisely because he felt these things so deeply, this theology came "home to roost" in particularly intense fashion. If Luther is to be charged with something in this matter, it would seem to me that it would have to be that he did not work through sufficiently some of his own reformation principles in this regard. He did not hold to or work out sufficiently his own premise that God in his wrath is indeed hidden in nature and history and that one cannot so easily assign it to one group in distinction from another. *Least of all* can one hope to escape it by burning Jewish synagogues and homes. For then one simply becomes possessed and driven by it rather than escaping it. This, it seems to me, Luther should have seen on the basis of his own principles. For, after all, at least two can play that sort of "wrath of God" game. One thinks, for instance, of the conversation which Luther himself reports in which he overheard a discussion in which a Jew was asked why the Jewish people were suffering so, and the Jew replied that it is was because their forefathers had allowed Christ and the apostles to go into the temple and had not immediately killed them, and further because the Jews had not sufficiently persecuted Christ and the apostles![24] In other words, the Jews were suffering because they had listened to the all-too-liberal Gameliel and let the apostles go! If God is truly hidden in his wrath, it is not for one group to assign the wrath of God to the other, but each must look to themselves.

Thus, if we are to get farther, theologically, as Lutherans especially, with this question, then it is, I think, somewhat beside the point to look for "changes" as such in Luther. What we must look for, it seems to me, are those points in which what was begun in the Reformation, and what was legitimate, as far as we can determine, were not sufficiently worked through. There are, of course, many other points besides the question of the wrath of God which need to be looked at. There is the major question of the Bible and hermeneutics. Kurt Meier, in the article noted at the outset, suggests that perhaps one of the problems in Luther's dealing with the Jews was that he had not yet sufficiently allowed the "material principle" of his reformation stance, namely, justification by faith, to affect the "formal principle," the *sola scriptura*. This meant that in spite of his view of justification by faith as being that which put everyone in the

same position—that we are *all* afflicted with "hardness of heart, and so forth, he still seems to have applied Scripture in such fashion as to assign such characteristics to the Jews. Thus, the material principle was not allowed sufficiently to affect his entire theological stance. This suggestion of Meier is, I think, a fruitful one to pursue and points to yet unfinished business. It should indeed be clear, in the light of the doctrine of justification, that it is simply impossible to assign to Jews any particular "sins" which are not ours as well. As St. Paul said, "There is now no distinction ..." and as Michael Wyshogrod correctly put it, "It is not for Gentiles to see the sins of Israel ... It is for Gentiles to love Israel. This, of course, is wrong, it cannot be asked of Gentiles. But it can be asked of Christians."[25] What is needed, in this regard, is for Lutherans, if not Christians in general, to work out a more consistent hermeneutic in the light of reformation principles. It is not sufficient, I would think, even to talk solely about the supposed anti-Semitism of the New Testament. For in many ways for us the problem is much the same even with the Old Testament. Anyone who has read Luther, and especially even the writings on the Jews, knows that much, if not more, of the "anti-Jewish" polemic is drawn from the Old Testament, especially the prophets. So this all needs to be worked through more consistently, if we are to come to a proper understanding of the matter and reach across the chasm which has separated us through the centuries. So then, the upshot of these preliminary reflections is that perhaps the principles with which the Reformation started, and which belong to the heart of the Lutheran faith, need to be worked out in such fashion that we can properly confront the questions and try to undo the damage, at least in some measure that has been done. This might also give us some guidance on the troublesome question which worries many about whether Christ should be preached to the Jews, or to put it in the more direct and offensive fashion, whether there should be a "mission to convert the Jews." I cannot, of course, speak for others on this, but it seems to me that it belongs to the very essence of a faith founded on justification by grace, that there is no distinction, and that I am called upon to preach Christ crucified, not by Jews, but by us all, and thus to proclaim him to all. It is true, of course, that the Jews form a quite special case, since we share a large

common heritage. But speaking for myself at least, if I thought there was something about Christ that would hurt the Jews or rob them of their heritage, I don't think I could preach him to anyone. Centuries of acrimony and tragedy, of course, makes it an extremely sensitive issue and one can approach it only with infinite care and openness, realizing that one has, if anything, as much to learn as to give.

Does this mean advocating a "mission to convert the Jews"? Perhaps here too we need to or can learn something from Luther. Luther, I think, simply did not share the views of much modern so-called "evangelicalism" when it came to the idea of "missions to convert" people. He believed that we must all live, from day to day, under the promise of the grace of God, and that none of us are going to be "converted" finally, at least this side of the grave. To that end, the Word of God must be preached to save us from wrath, sin, and our own fantasies so we can turn to face our brothers and sisters in love, care, and patience. So we should seek to preach, to teach, to discuss, to dialogue, whatever it may be, in the hope that we all may indeed find each other and be one under the grace of the electing God.

[*Editor's note: Midway through this essay, Forde mentions "articles by Aarne Siirala and Kurt Meier" and he refers to the latter near the end of the essay. Neither Forde's essay nor the booklet in which it originally appeared give further specification, but the most likely publications are: Aarne Siirala, "Luther and the Jews,"* Lutheran World *11 (1964): 337-357, and Kurt Meier, "Zur Interpretation von Luthers Judenschriften," in his* Kirche und Judentum *(Halle: Niemayer, 1968), 127-153. Overall, the literature on this theme since 1977 is immense, as now glimpsed in the bibliography to* Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People: a Reader, *ed. Brooks Schramm and Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012), as reviewed in this issue. Their helpful collection of twenty-eight Luther texts in translation also appends (p. 211) the 1994 "Declaration by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community."*]

NOTES

1. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols. Eds. Pelikan and Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.) 45:213. (Hereafter cited as LW.)
2. LW 45:213.

3. LW 45:229.
4. LW 47:137.
5. LW 47:137.
6. LW 47:304.
7. LW 47:268.
8. LW 47:139.
9. See the introduction to the treatise in LW 47:123-36.
10. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of Will*, trans. Packer and Johnston (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1957), 84.
11. LW 47:268.
12. LW 47:268.
13. LW 47:268.
14. LW 47:269.
15. LW 47:274.
16. LW 47:274.
17. LW 47:268.
18. Reinhold Lewin, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden* (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, repr. 1973), 86-8.
19. Lewin, 87-8.
20. LW 47:292.
21. Lewin, 79.
22. LW 47:191-192.
23. LW 47:292.
24. Referred to in Lewin, note 6, p. 39.
25. "A Jewish Theologian and Karl Barth," *Footnotes to a Theology*, The Karl Barth Colloquium of 1972, ed. Martin Rumscheidt (Waterloo, Ont.: Corporation for the Publication of Academic Studies in Religion in Canada, 1974), 110.