LUTHER'S JEWS
A Journey into Anti-Semitism

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Chapter 2

The Church's Enemies

Luther's Early Theological Position on the Jews

The topic 'Luther and the Jews' involves considering the important question of continuities between his earliest pronouncements, the programmatic text That Jesus Christ was born a Jew (1523), and his later texts, in particular Concerning the Jews and Their Lies (1543), which are extraordinarily polemical and hostile to the Jews. It is incontrovertible that the recommendations Luther makes regarding the Jews in the two texts named above differ fundamentally: If at first he advocated unconditional toleration of Jews within Christian society, later he advocated the expulsion of the Jews from the Christian countries of Europe, although this practical change in approach does not necessarily indicate a fundamental alteration of his theological position. Explaining this change will involve offering a complex of interrelated answers. This is the central problem this book deals with.

As far as theological continuities in his view of the Jews are concerned, Luther's earliest comments are revealing, though it is important to take note of which statements Luther delivered from the pulpit or the university lectern to a Wittenberg audience and which occur in texts he wrote for a reading public spread over the whole German-speaking world, not to mention a readership educated in Latin. From the summer of 1520—in other words at the start of the phase of his life marked by the conclusion of his trial as a heretic in Rome and the promulgation of the Papal Bull Exsurge Domine (15.6.1520) threatening him with excommunication—his writings clearly support a gentle, kind, and accommodating attitude towards the Jews. In this period in particular he was acutely aware of the sins and shortcomings of Christendom.

Luther's earliest statements on this topic come from the context of the Reuchlin controversy. The Saxon court preacher and secretary Georg Spalatin had asked him via Johannes Lang, Luther's friend and fellow member of his order, for a comment on this dispute and on the issue of whether the Hebrew scholar, Johannes Reuchlin, was, as the Cologne theologians accused him of being, a heretic. Luther's verdict is undated but must belong to the period of his first lecture on the Psalms (1513/14), the Dictata super psalterium. He did not attempt to conceal his sympathy for Reuchlin and his position, decisively rejecting the suspicion of heresy. In response to the bigoted zeal of the Cologne theologians directed at 'driving out Beelzebub', in other words at making it impossible for the Jews to blaspheme, Luther pointed out that the blasphemies that issued from Christendom were a hundred times worse. All Biblical prophets, he wrote, had foretold 'that the Jews will vilify and blaspheme against God and their King Jesus' (maledicturos et blasphematos). But the Scriptures had to be fulfilled; to prevent the blasphemies of the Jews was the same as claiming that the Bible was telling lies:

[F]or through the wrath of God they [the Jews] are condemned to being incapable of improvement, as the Preacher says (Ecclesiastes 15, 15), and any attempt at improving those who are incapable of improvement only makes them worse and never better.7

From 1518 onwards Luther in various published writings had identified a closer connection between himself and Reuchlin and occasionally compared his own fate with his, although in the summer of 1521 he made a comment that dispelled any doubt that he considered the 'Jewish books' Reuchlin had tried to defend to be utterly base; he even confessed that he had been ashamed 'that so much has been made of these
worthless things [...] in the name of Christianity. Luther’s firm theological convictions regarding the Jews, namely that they were the objects of God’s wrath, were corrupt, blasphemers of Christ, and followed worthless rabbinical interpretations that confirmed them in their errors, did not prevent him from making a stand in support of the great Hebrew scholar and advocate of Jewish rights.

In his first lecture on the Psalms Luther repeatedly returned to the topic of the Jews. They spurned Christ as mediator, he said, knowing nothing of God’s mercy and grace, and were trapped in the logic of their own notion of justice, in other words set on the idea that they could be justified in God’s sight by their own works. Their obduracy prevented them from understanding anything of the foretelling of Christ in the Old Testament. Their hopes for a Messiah and their complete devotion to the Law, in which they appeared to love God, were ‘of the flesh’, for they hoped only for temporal riches and their own good standing. The Talmud, he continued, had diverted them from a correct understanding of the Bible and confirmed them in the arrogant and mistaken claim to be the children of Abraham. They were an exemplar of God’s wrath, guilty of Christ’s death and thus dishonoured among all nations. The overall picture of Judaism painted by Luther in this lecture was strongly negative, though the lecture was not disseminated at that time.

Luther repeatedly compared the Jews with heretics, though also with scholastic theologians; for him they represented a basic attitude of hostility to God and confidence in their own interpretations and sophistries that prevented them from gaining a proper understanding of the Bible. Only a small remnant of the Jews would be saved by conversion to Christ and only God could bring that about. In the Dictata super psalterium Luther used the ‘Jew’ as the antitype of the pious Christian living solely by God’s grace and as the type of God’s enemy. He arrived at his negative pronouncements on the Jews primarily by applying to them a variety of derogatory characterizations he encountered in the Psalms. The underlying assumption was that the ‘reality’ of contemporary Jewry corresponded to the image of the Jew derived in this manner.

Further statements by Luther in other lectures and sermons confirm the image emerging from the Dictata. In a sermon of around 1516 he identified the Jews by the fact that they ‘seek to be justified by their works’ and ‘therefore refuse to hear that Christ is their righteousness’. In a further sermon that year he emphasized that the Jewish Messianic hope was fixated on worldly pomp, and this was part and parcel of the Jews’ carnal attitudes. Jews were unwilling to change their thoughts and feelings, Luther insisted; thus they represented the ‘old man’, the sinner tout court, in other words someone who relied on his own wisdom and righteousness, someone impudent, who claimed God’s grace on the basis of his own merits. According to Luther the Jew stands for a religious attitude that is diametrically opposed to justification by faith.

Luther assumed that a ‘Jew’ would persist as a ‘Jew’ in the habitual ways outlined. In the printed sermon On the Sacrament of Christ’s Body (1519) he emphasized that ‘to this day the Jews’ failed to lay hold by faith of Christ’s work. Once Christ had appeared Israel’s ritual laws were null and void, as he stressed in his commentary on Galatians (1519). Isaiah’s or Micah’s criticism of ritual (Is. 1, 11; Micah 6, 6) was nowadays directed at the Jews, who continued to observe the ritual laws. Works done in obedience to the Ten Commandments had become obsolete as a result of the spiritual works of Christians, with the result that Jews, as it were, sullied the Lord’s day by their manner of trying to keep the Sabbath holy. The reformer’s determination, mitigated by no sense of historical contextualization, to be guided by Scripture alone (sola scriptura) produced a multitude of negative attributes from the Bible that could be applied to the Jews, who were already defined through clear stereotypes.

The contrast of Church and synagogue (a powerful topos in medieval exegesis, theology, and iconography; see Figure 7) ran through the second lecture on the Psalms (Operationes in psalmo) that Luther gave from 1518 onwards and which was published soon after. In it he focused more and more distinctly on the opposition of a truly spiritual Church on the one hand and the Jewish religion of ceremonial and Law on the other. The latter, he claimed, glorified its own righteousness, claimed
of their destiny to hate the Church, to injure it and to live dispersed and in bondage.\textsuperscript{12}

Luther was suspicious of cabalistic speculations about the ten names of God and the tetragram as being blasphemous and superstitious; in his second lecture on the Psalms he publicly opposed tendencies of this kind, which had attracted more interest as a result of Reuchlin's work.\textsuperscript{13} God's name Jesus revealed God's justice to the Christian; 'that is the true Cabbala of God's name, not the tetragram's, on which the Jews build the most fantastical superstitions'.\textsuperscript{14} Christians had to make faith in Christ the starting point of all their thinking and steer clear of all Jewish delusions and speculations. God's name in the Old Testament had therefore to be interpreted in the light of Trinitarian theology. This rejection of the Cabbala became widely known and through it Luther took up a clear position with regard to the developments in this field within the emerging discipline of Christian Hebrew studies; in 1543 in his late writings on the Jews he commented again in detail on this discussion.

In the controversies arising from the Reformation this model of the false religion of the Jews was visibly useful to Luther as a means of directing polemic against Roman Catholicism. From 1520/1 onwards the Jews are actually judged more leniently than the 'papists'. The same is true of Luther's references to the 'Turks'. In relation to the conflict over indulgences he took the view that, as the papal church was interested only in money, Jews and Turks could be invited without hesitation to pay to have their souls set free. After all, if they were only handing over money, it made no difference if they were not baptized. No unbeliever, he claimed, could be so displeasing to God as papist Christians were.\textsuperscript{15} The more Lutheran consigned the Catholic Church that condemned him increasingly to the sphere of the Antichrist, the more his judgments on the Jews began to become 'relativized'. More positive statements of this kind about the declared enemies of Christ were of course primarily useful in polemics against the Catholic Church and in mobilizing resistance to it.

In his second lecture on the Psalms, the \textit{Operationes in psalmos}, Luther's interpretation of the verse 'Oh that the salvation of Israel were come out
of Sion! when the Lord bringeth back the captivity of his people’ (Psalm 14,7) caused him again to address the conversion of the Jews. He emphasized that God alone could bring about a change in Israel’s relationship to Christ; according to Romans 11 this would happen when ‘the fullness of the Gentiles’ had been saved. ‘From Sion’ implied that the help destined for the Jews was found on Christ. ‘God is able to graft [graft] them in again’ (Romans 11, 23). This perception of Israel’s redemption and conversion had direct implications for Luther’s views on relations with the Jews:

Therefore the fanaticism [furia] of some Christians (if they are even fit to be called Christians) is to be condemned. They think they are doing God a favour if they persecute the Jews in the most hateful manner, have the lowest opinion of them and pour scorn on them with extreme arrogance and disdain because of their regrettable faults, when the appropriate response, according to the example of this Psalm [14,7] and of Paul in Romans 9 [14], would be to feel sorrow and the greatest sympathy on their account, and to pray constantly for them. These people should take to heart Paul’s words in Romans 11 [18]: ‘Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou boastest not the root, but the root thee.’ The overbearing behaviour of these godless people, who are Christians in name only, does no little damage both to the name ‘Christian’ as well as to Christian people. They are blameworthy and contribute to the godlessness of the Jews, to whom they make Christianity repellent because of the example of cruelty they set, even though the Jews should be attracted by great gentleness, patience, prayer and solicitude. Even ignorant theologians defend the bigotry of these people who proudly and confidently hold forth that the Jews are the slaves of Christians and subject to the Emperor, whereas they themselves are about as Christian as anybody nowadays is truly a Roman Emperor. I ask you: who is likely to convert to our religion if he sees himself treated with such venom and hostility and appears to be treated by us not only not in a Christian manner but as a brute. If hatred for Jews, heretics and Turks makes people Christians then we are truly the most Christian of people. If, on the other hand, loving Christ is what makes people Christians then we are without doubt worse than the Jews, heretics and Turks, as no-one loves Christ less than we do.¹⁵

This call for a fundamental revision in Christians’ behaviour towards the Jews was based on unsparing criticism of the existing Church. It did not reflect any positive change in Luther’s way of thinking with regard to Judaism as such, but rather presupposed a profound theological gulf. Crucial to any reform in the practical treatment of the Jews was the aim of improving the prospects of their converting.

This passage from the second lecture on the Psalms is indicative of the standpoint Luther would continue to adopt. He also complained that Christians gorged out the eyes of images of Jews painted on walls, in other words torturing them in effigy for their culpability for the crucifixion of Christ. He distanced himself too from the widespread practice of preachers at Passion tide who incited Christians to hatred of the Jews; in doing so, he said, they denied that the love of God and of Christ were crucial in relationships with the Jews. When in his Sermon on the Contemplation of the Holy Suffering of Christ (1519) Luther expressed disapproval of their being reviled as part of the commemoration of the Passion, he was pursuing the same line of argument; the sufferings of Jesus should rather make Christians ponder their own sinfulness, of which the ‘evildoers, the Jews whom God had chosen and driven away’ had been instruments.¹⁷ They should follow Christ’s suffering in fear and terror. As Luther stated in a sermon a few days before he set off for the Imperial Diet at Worms at the end of March 1521, to ‘hurl abuse’ at the Jews or at Judas and show anger towards them was to use the cross in a manner that was ‘of no benefit’ to anyone.¹⁸ That did not, however, prevent him from stating at roughly the same time that the Jews ‘crucified Christ;’¹⁹ they deserved their misery. They had ‘always been Christ’s greatest enemy’ and would not grant that he was God, ‘enduring sin and death, but they continue to live in their sins’.²⁰ He reworked the pre-Reformation Passion tide hymn ‘Oh, poor Judas’, which consigns the fallen disciple and the Jews to the agony of eternal damnation as a punishment for betraying the Lord, for the Wittenberg hymnal:

And so, poor Judas, along with the multitude of Jews, we may not speak to you in anger for we are the guilty ones.²¹

Symptomatic of the complexity and contradictory nature of the evidence is the way Luther dealt with the stereotype of usury. In his (Little) Sermon on Usury (1519) he had called the charging of interest ‘little Jewish
tricks and deceptions\textsuperscript{22} and claimed that the participation of Church institutions in the bond market arose from 'Jewish greed and love of usury'\textsuperscript{23} and was completely contrary to the gospel. On the other hand, in his Great Sermon on Usury (1520), published shortly after, and in the tract Concerning Commerce and Usury (1524) the epithet Jewish was not attached to the term usury. The same occurred in two other influential texts written in the eventful Reformation year 1520. In Concerning Good Works Luther described a number of central social, ethical, and economic problems of the time (indebtedness arising from the importation of luxury items of food and clothing and the finance system) as the 'three Jews, so to speak, who suck the whole world dry'.\textsuperscript{24} However, in his most important reform pamphlet To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation concerning the Improvement of the Christian Condition, in which he discussed the same subjects in detail, he did not attach the adjective 'Jewish' to these problems. Then in his Call to Priests to Preach against Usury (1540) it reappeared.\textsuperscript{25}

It was also important in the history of the impact and reception of the Little Sermon and the Great Sermon on Usury that, starting with the first editions printed in Wittenberg, they were published with title pages featuring woodcuts showing a rapacious 'Jewish usurer' (see Figure 8) with captions such as 'Pay up or pay interest for I want profit' or 'My name is Rabin and I always want gain'. Thus the medium of communication highlighted a 'popular' anti-Jewish motif, namely usury, that had either not been present in Luther's actual text or had been only peripheral to it, for his concern had been to pillory Christians' ethical failure and that of those Christian leaders responsible for financial arrangements. Allusions to the 'wickedness' of the Jews, however, were bound to promote Christian self-righteousness, something that was no less true of how the Passion of Christ was presented than of matters relating to how socio-economic conditions might be made to conform to the Gospel.

Can Luther be blamed for the anti-Semitic title page? In the case of the Sermon on Usury Luther had thoroughly revised the text, both versions of which the Wittenberg printer Johannes Grünenberg published with the same woodcut as title page. From this it seems reasonable to conclude that Luther apparently was not offended by this anti-Jewish spin on his criticism of contemporary finance, though it narrowed the scope of his criticism, or else that he willingly accepted it as an aspect of the printed version that would boost sales. His occasional comment that he had 'truly no time [...] to take notice of what kind of pictures,
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lettering, ink or paper the printer uses' does not change that conclusion in any fundamental way. 28

In Luther's Commentary on the Magnificat (Luke 1, 46–51), work on which was interrupted by his journey to the Diet of Worms and completed in the Wartburg, we find a specifically Reformation attitude to the Jews expressed in a compact vernacular form. Luther's exegesis claimed that in his promise to Abraham God had already pointed to Christ and to faith in him and the Gospel. All the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament had therefore 'had the faith and Gospel that we have, as St Paul, 1 Corinthians 10, says.' 29 The faith that the righteous of the Old Covenant place in the one who is to come and Christians place in the Saviour who has come is founded, he continues, on the truth and reliability of God's promise. The Jews had received the Law only after the promise to Abraham that pointed forward to Christ so that they would recognize their sin and fix their gaze the more urgently on God's promise. But they misunderstood the Law as an instrument by which to establish their own righteousness. That barred their way to salvation for they let Christ, the seed promised to Abraham, pass them by. The prophets of Israel understood the true function of the Law and denounced the self-righteousness of the Jews but they were persecuted for doing so. The promise made to Abraham holds, nevertheless, 'for ever'; 'that such grace was given to Abraham's bloodline (which means the Jews) should be understood as being for ever, from that time onwards throughout all time up to the Last Judgement.' 30 This implies, Luther writes, that to the end of history there will always be Jews who convert to Christianity; from that, however, he draws a corresponding conclusion about how the Jews as a whole are to be treated:

In Luther's interpretation of the Magnificat the link crucial to his Reformation theology between God's promise or his Gospel and Christ on the one hand and faith in them on the other was applied systematically to relations with the Jews. This promise was made to them at the beginning of the history of salvation and would always remain valid. The messages of the prophets gave it new relevance. However, the Jews, failing to recognize the purpose of the Law, as Luther, interpreting St Paul, believed, had turned away from the promise and set up a notion of righteousness based on their own works. Even so, the promise still held none the less and would continue to result in conversions to Christ up to the Day of Judgement.

Christians should in no way regard themselves as superior to the Jews. The 'open situation' in which the Jews found themselves as a result of God's promise should prompt Christians to behave kindly to them. Luther did not recognize any distinction in principle or of theological relevance between the Jews as children of Abraham and the Jews of his own day.

Seen against the background of the social, legal, and intellectual conditions of the time these statements are very remarkable. In that eventful phase of his life when Luther's definitive position vis-à-vis the papal Church was emerging and he was laying the foundation for a conception of faith and justification resting on God's promise, he advocated toleration of the Jews and the preaching of the Gospel to them with a new openness.

It is therefore significant when reaching an overall judgement of Luther's early pronouncements that there is no mention at all, either in his sermons and lectures or in his early printed works, of the, to the Jews, potentially life-threatening accusations of ritual murder, desecration of the host, and poisoning of wells. In particular, in his texts

For even though the vast majority [of Jews] are obdurate, there will always be some, however few, who turn to Christ and have faith in him: for this promise of God does not lie; the promise was made to Abraham and his seed, not for a year, not for a thousand years, but forever, that is from one age to all ages without end. We should therefore not treat the Jews so unkindly, for there are amongst them future Christians and those who are daily becoming Christians. They alone and not we Gentiles have the promise that among Abraham's seed there will always be Christians who recognise the blessed seed. [...] Who would become a Christian if he sees Christians treating other human beings in so unchristian a manner? That is not how to behave, dear Christians. Let us tell them the truth in all kindness and if they will not respond let them go. How many Christians do not honour Christ, do not listen to his word and are worse than heathens and Jews. 31
published in 1520 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. For Luther God acted through his word. If God was willing to put aside the wrath that was directed at the Jews as his enemies, he would use his word to do so. Now, in the Last Days, when the Antichrist had been revealed in Rome, Luther, God's prophet and interpreter of his word, was part of this process.

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 Reuschlin. Can we conclude from the letter that Regensburg Jews sent him (see above p. 26) or from the visit he may have received in Worms from a Jewish delegation (see above p. 27 f.) that in 1520 the reformer had also become a beacon of hope for Jews? A statement made by Luther to Hieronymus Emser of Dresden in 1519 possibly confirms this. He asked his challenger:

Why do you not accuse me also of being a Jew [in the same way that you accuse me of being a 'Bohemian', that is a follower of the Hussite heresy], or of being a defender of the Jews [Judaeorum patronum], that is to exculpate me because I deny agreeing with them, though they themselves confess that many things that I firmly support are part of their faith [multa esse sua].

Does this passage indicate that Luther had been made aware that his views were being positively received in Jewish circles? Was he even being told this by Jews themselves? The reference might suggest that they saw themselves and Luther as having 'many things' in common, though 'many things' does not mean 'everything', and this would probably hold true in the case of converts. Was Luther perhaps conscious that Jews were beginning to attach hopes to him? Or was he using the Jews here simply to construct an analogy with the 'Bohemian heretics' in a piece of dazzling rhetoric without a basis in fact? Were 'Luther's Jews' in this instance made of flesh and blood or were they linguistic creations, mere phantoms? We do not know.
Chapter 3

The Jews’ Friend?

Luther’s ‘Reformation’ of Attitudes towards the Jews

That Jesus Christ was born a Jew is the work of Luther’s on the subject of the Jews that in its time had the greatest impact. It was first published in spring 1523 in a German version that appeared in a total of ten contemporary editions. Soon after the German edition the first Latin one was published. It was the work of Justus Jonas, Luther’s Wittenberg colleague and friend, who was asked to produce it by Andreas Rem of Augsburg, a supporter of the Reformation. The Latin version targeted an international public. In his dedicatory letter to Rem, Jonas wrote: ‘Luther was happy with your advice to produce a version of this little book in the language used extensively by all countries, for there is hope that in Latin it will be of use to many more people than in German.’ In 1525 a second Latin edition appeared in Strasbourg. It was the work of Luther’s former assistant Johannes Lonicer, who was particularly active in making Luther’s views known in France.

The Latin editions also contained a document that was missing from the German ones, a letter from Luther to the ‘converted Jew’ Bernhard. It revealed what the Wittenbergers expected from the publication and their intention to use it as propaganda. They meant to tell the world that the ‘rise of the Gospel’ had brought about notable numbers of conversions among the Jews. Jonas expressed the hope that the ‘Jewish matter’ (negotium cum Judaeis) might proceed as smoothly as the other changes that had come about as a result of the rapid course taken by the Gospel.

Nothing demonstrated the truth of the Reformation movement more clearly, it seemed, than the fact that it had succeeded where the Church of Rome had failed for centuries, namely in winning Jews over in significant numbers to the Christian faith.

Luther expressed this in a manner characteristic of his keenly apocalyptic consciousness during the early 1520s:

In truth, as the golden light of the Gospel is just now rising and beaming forth, there is hope that many of the Jews will be converted in a conscientious and faithful manner and thus be drawn sincerely to Christ as you [Bernhard] were drawn and a number of others [quidam alii], who were saved by grace as a remnant of the seed of Abraham.

Just as the Church of Rome was being called a final time before the end of days to repent by the sound of the Gospel, so that sound was penetrating now to the Jews!

The reader does not discover anything more detailed about Bernhard’s conversion, nor about the ‘number of others’—how many they were, how they found their way to Christianity and their fate thereafter. Luther’s dedicatory letter focuses on the ‘serious’ turning of Jews to Christianity. This and not any purely external conversion was what concerned him. Thus he emphasized that the conversion [conversio] of the Jews was spoken ill of [infamis] everywhere, among Jews as well as among Christians. The former thought that Jews converted if they had committed a serious crime that made it impossible for them to continue living among a Jewish community. The latter assumed that Jewish converts converted only as far as externals went and secretly remained Jews—the Marrano problem—and that they became, or pretended to be, Christians for purely material or other superficial reasons.

In order to illustrate the frequency of ‘false’ conversions Luther gave a standard example of an incident that was said to have occurred at the court of the Emperor Sigismund:

There a court Jew [aulicus Judaeus] asked persistently to become a Christian; finally he was received and baptized; after this he was put to the test but
prematurely and in a manner exceeding his strength [sed ante tempus et ultra vires]. For soon after he had been baptized the Emperor had two fires made. Calling the one the Jews' fire and the other the Christians' fire he commanded the baptized Jew to choose which one he would rather be burnt to death in. For now, he said, you are baptized and holy and cannot get any better than you are now. Thereupon the wretched man chose the Jews' fire, proving that he had either pretended to have faith or that his faith was weak, leapt into it as a Jew and was burnt as a Jew.4

By recounting this story neutrally (at best there is a hint of a judgement in the reference to the trial being too early and disproportionate) Luther painted a somewhat intimidating picture of what was required in a Jewish conversion: the adoption of Christianity must be a matter of conscience and wholehearted. Anything else was inadequate. Another incident he mentions only briefly here but recounts in more detail in other contexts5 carried the same message. A Jewish convert to Christianity had progressed to being a deacon in Cologne. When he died he had images of a cat and a mouse put on his grave to show that a Jew always remains a Jew and thus could no more become a Christian than these two creatures could ever become friends. By telling such stories Luther was emphasizing that he regarded them as plausible and instructive. His distrust of Jewish converts was deep-seated.

In the dedicatory letter to Bernhard, however, he made not the Jews but the decadence of the papal Church responsible for merely superficial conversions. The representatives of the clerical establishment had been unable, either through correct teaching or through Christian morals and behaviour, to kindle a ‘tiny spark of light or fire in the Jews’.6 Although the Church of Rome had attacked Jews who had turned to the church only ostensibly, it had, he said, done nothing to improve the message preached by its representatives or their moral character.

According to Luther That Jesus Christ was born a Jew was supposed to confirm the faith in which Bernhard had been ‘baptized in spirit and born of God’.7 He also expressed the hope that other Jews would be moved to follow Bernhard’s ‘example and actions’ [nun exemplo et opere]8 and be brought to Christ. The aim of the treatise consisted primarily in offering guidance to Christians or Jewish converts to Christianity who engaged in missionary work with Jews. The shining example of Bernhard seemed to usher in a new ‘Reformation era’ in the 1,500-year history of relations between Christians and Jews and a new phase in the evangelization of the latter.

In his foreword to the Latin edition Jonas too expressed the belief that the beginning of the Reformation created a new situation with regard to the Jews. It was evident, he told Rem, that ‘they have had the same experience as we’. For just as we had been diverted ‘from the Word of God and the simplicity of Scripture’ by ‘Scotist and Thomist fantasies’, in other words by scholastic doctrines, so the Jews had been driven away from the Bible by the Talmud. The Reformation insistence on Scripture alone (sola scriptura) underlay the confidence felt by Jonas as well as by Luther that those Jews ‘to whom it has been given to hold to the pure writings of Moses and the Prophets’ would be convinced by the Wittenbergers’ arguments. Although there had been a whole series of writings in the past designed to persuade the Jews of the truth of Christianity, ‘this little book [of Luther’s] is full of such arguments as will make the Jews unable to say anything valid to dispute them’.9 The Reformers were therefore convinced that it had never before been demonstrated in a more compelling fashion that the Messiah expected in the Old Testament had come in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. Luther’s work, Jonas wrote, contained an offer that a ‘Jew’, such as those in Wittenberg imagined him to be, could not refuse.

Who was this Bernhard, who had become the focus of hope of a wave of conversions by European Jews to the Reformation faith? His birth name was Joseph Gipher. He came from Göppingen in South-West Germany and had been a rabbi. He must have been baptized before the summer of 1519 and have been influenced by Luther’s theology. He took the name Bernhard after baptism. For a short time he taught Hebrew at the University of Wittenberg. Later as a courier and academic assistant he maintained his connection with scholarly circles in the Saxon university town.

Bernhard married a servant of Luther’s colleague Karlstadt and lived with her in Schweinitz, a village close to Wittenberg. In March 1523 Luther,
Jonas, and other members of the university took part in a baptismal celebration, to which the Elector contributed wine, for a ‘sibling in Christ born to Bernhard’. In my view there is no doubt that Bernhard was that pious baptized Jew from whom Luther claims to have heard that converts from Judaism, ‘if they did not hear the Gospel in our day, remained Jews their whole life long under cover of being Christians’. At this time Bernhard was the only convert with whom Luther had any contact. He had fostered the expectation among the Wittenbergers that the Reformation ‘rediscovery of the Gospel’ would lead to a more profound and serious response to Christianity on the part of Jews. Luther’s treatise *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew* documents this hope. At the same time, it represents a means of educating converts from Judaism in how to be ‘proper Christians’.

In the introduction to *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew*, Luther mentions the fact that lies, spread by the ‘old faith’, were circulating about him and his teachings. From the correspondence of the Saxony administration relating to the Nuremberg Imperial Diet (1532/3) it is possible to conclude that these reports played some kind of role on the political stage in the Empire and were one reason why the Elector of Saxony considered removing Luther once more, as he had done after the Diet of Worms, from the public sphere. He was accused, amongst other things, of having denied the bodily presence of Christ in the elements of the Mass and the Virgin Birth and of teaching that Jesus was descended as a Jew from the ‘seed of Abraham’ and thus of arguing that he was not the Son of God. Even if Luther was right in believing that these accusations were unfounded, he considered it necessary to produce a detailed response ‘for the sake of others’, in other words for his adherents and supporters, who might have been confused by the rumours.

The approach he took to refuting the charges in *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew* went beyond defending himself against ‘fool and squalid rabidity’; he wanted to offer ‘something useful’. He therefore set out the reasons that led him to believe ‘that Christ was a Jew born of a virgin and that I might perhaps prompt even some Jews to take up the Christian faith’.

Luther therefore hoped a secondary effect of his treatise would be its impact on the Jews, whereas his primary intention was to defend himself against an altogether grotesque accusation of heresy made by the Catholics. The implied readership matched this intention; Luther aimed to speak to Christian readers and provide them with helpful arguments for their ‘missionary’ encounters with Jews. The scope of his purpose did not extend to making direct contact with the Jews via the printed word. His ‘action’ consisted either in expounding to the Jews the ‘Gospel’ content of their scripture or in doing this for those ‘who aim to have dealings with them’. He intended to ‘be of service’ to the Jews and perhaps even hoped to reach them with his treatise or its arguments, but he was not addressing them directly.

Luther embedded his positive message, an exposition of how the doctrines of Jesus as Messiah and his virgin birth could be derived from the Old Testament, in a sharply critical assessment of how the Church of Rome had behaved towards the Jews hitherto. He combined a negative account of the mistakes of the ‘papists’ with a profound understanding of the reasons that had made Jews reject Christianity up to that point:

> For our fools the popes, bishops, sophists and monks, all stupid donkeys, have treated the Jews in such a way that anyone who was a good Christian would have been apt to want to become a Jew. And if I had been a Jew and had seen such idiots and thickheads in charge of and teaching the Christian faith I would have rather become a pig than a Christian.

The traditional manner of dealing with the Jews had been characterized, he writes, by treating them ‘like dogs and not human beings’, they had been reproved, robbed of their property and after baptism they had been refused any instruction from a qualified person about the doctrines and the moral teaching of the Church. Lies were spread about them, associated, for example, with the accusation of ritual murder, and it had been falsely claimed that

> they must have Christian blood if they do not want to stink and who knows what other sorts of foolishness. If we regard them as dogs how can we have a good effect on them? Forbidding them to work and trade or have any shared human existence with us, thus driving them to usury, how is that going to improve them?
The strategy that now seemed appropriate to Luther amounted to no less than a widening of Jewish participation in Christian society. The Jews should be allowed to take up professions of their own choice and so free themselves from reliance on usury: 'the law of Christian love [should be] practised on them and they should be received kindly and allowed to trade and work with us, to live alongside us, and to hear and see our Christian teaching and way of life.'\textsuperscript{22} Luther assumed that integration in the networks and the everyday world of Christians would in time draw the Jews irresistibly to Christianity. While being treated kindly and 'correctly',\textsuperscript{23} in other words, with care, they should be instructed from the Bible.\textsuperscript{24} The aim of this instruction in the faith was to convince the Jews that turning to Christianity signified a return to the faith of their 'fathers, of the Prophets and Patriarchs'.\textsuperscript{25}

Luther expected that 'many of them' would become 'proper Christians'\textsuperscript{26} but that there would also be 'a number' who would remain 'stubborn' and reject any missionary endeavour.\textsuperscript{27} That should not, however, lead to the conclusion that his policy of 'kind' relations practised in the proximity of everyday encounters was misguided; 'after all, we ourselves are not all good Christians.'\textsuperscript{28}

In addition to his argument for 'kind' treatment of the Jews as a way of supporting missionary work among them, Luther produced another, which stemmed from the earliest history of Christianity. For the Apostles had also been Jews and treated 'us Gentiles\textsuperscript{29} in a brotherly fashion; 'by the same token we should also deal in a brotherly manner with the Jews if we want to convert some of them'.\textsuperscript{30} Therefore the moral obligation to try in a kindly fashion to win the Jews over was founded in the original constitution of the Church, which was made up of Gentiles and Jews.

Luther went even further and emphasized the particular proximity of the Jews to 'Christ's blood'; 'we Gentiles', he writes, are 'relatives by marriage and strangers, while they are of the same blood, cousins and brothers of our Lord'.\textsuperscript{31} Although this proximity is only external and of the flesh, God has nevertheless distinguished the Jewish people in an unprecedented way by calling our Saviour as well as all the Prophets and Apostles from them: 'And although the Gospel has been declared to all the world, God gave Holy Scripture, that is the Law and the Prophets, to no other people apart from the Jews [...]'.\textsuperscript{32} In view of the fact that, following on from the Apostle Paul, he emphasized that the origins of salvation went back to the promise given to Israel, Luther made the mischievous and provocative suggestion that the 'papists' should 'call him a Jew'.\textsuperscript{33}

Did Luther's rhetorical 'self-Judaicization' make him a 'friend of the Jews'? Certainly he was in the sense that he advocated the adoption of a 'kind' manner towards them, rejected using any measures to pressurize them into converting, and emphasized the towering importance of Israel in the history of salvation. These aspects made his treatise completely untypical of what was normally understood by 'policies regarding the Jews'. It should at the same time be noted, however, that Luther's point of reference was hardly Judaism in its 'really existing' contemporary form. He postulated or assumed that a Jew of his own era should regard himself as being as directly confronted by the word of Scripture, as was the case for Luther and the Reformation movement. A normative post-Biblical Jewish tradition was something he considered to be lacking in legitimacy, as was Church tradition. By contrast with Reuchlin he accorded no significance to post-Biblical Jewish writings. In his concept of Judaism they played an exclusively negative role. 'Luther's Jews' were to refer only to the Old Testament. 'His' Jews, the ones he set out to protect, were 'Luther's Jews' only in the context of his opposition to the ancien régime of the Catholic Church. 'Luther's Jews' were primarily a creation deriving from the Pauline writings of the New Testament.

The change in policy towards the Jews inaugurated by That Jesus Christ was born a Jew did not take the empirical situation of contemporary Jewry as its point of reference but the imagined 'original situation' of the Apostles, which at that precise moment, Luther's present, was relevant once again and for the last time before the end of the world through the impact of the 'prophet' Luther. Although Luther's ground-breaking approach of advocating 'kindness' to the Jews broke with the legally sanctioned rationale in force hitherto, namely of secular powers.
granting time-limited protection to Jews as a special dispensation, there was an important qualification: 'until I can see what effect I have had'. With hindsight this warning seems clearly threatening; was the fate of the Jews going to depend on the assessment of this much lionized churchman from Wittenberg and on the outcome of Reformation religious propaganda directed at the Jews? The fact that this really was the case became increasingly apparent from the mid-1530s onwards. The older Luther's hostility to the Jews was rooted in the younger man's 'kindness' to them.

Exegetical arguments, through which he attempted to prove that Jewish Scripture speaks of Jesus Christ or points to him, formed the theological core and densest section of Luther's first 'Jewish writing'. He first reconstructed a sequence of 'Gospel' promises that indicated the coming of the Saviour, beginning with God's words to the serpent, 'I will create enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed' (Gen 3, 15), a verse that according to Luther was the 'very first Gospel message on earth'. He then quoted the promise that Abraham will be blessed: 'In thy seed shall all nations be blest' (Gen 22, 18). The mention of 'seed' in both verses was, Luther says, a reference to Jesus. The fact that Christ was foretold as a 'blessed seed' implied for Luther that he could not have been fathered by any man and so must have been conceived without sin, for otherwise he would not be 'blessed' but a natural human being. Further texts, which were taken to prove the Virgin Birth explicitly from the Old Testament, were 2 Samuel 7, 12 and Isaiah 7, 14. The fact that these verses are quoted in the New Testament completed the 'proof'.

Luther introduced the second part of the treatise with the clear statement that he was 'glad to be of service' to the Jews also in bringing 'some of them' to that 'true faith', characteristic of their fathers but which the Jews had abandoned. The texts presented were designed to show that it was wrong to wait for the Messiah, as he had already come. Genesis 49, 10 ('The sceptre shall not depart from Judah [...] until Shiloh come') was proof that Christ must be the one foretold, as Israel had had no kingdom or any sceptre for 1,500 years. In similar fashion he inferred from verses from the apocalyptic Book of Daniel (Dan 9, 24–7) that the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus had to occur after the coming of the Messiah, which in turn proved that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.

Luther was more than ready to adapt to the habits of mind conditioning how Jewish people received his message. To begin with it was sufficient, he believed, if they acknowledged Jesus as the true Messiah: 'After that they should drink wine and learn how he can be truly God. They have been led astray too deeply and for too long to be given the message in a precise manner, for they are too steeped in the notion that God cannot be human.' The Jews had therefore to be taught correct doctrine in stages. Thus in That Jesus Christ was born a Jew Luther put forward exegetical arguments covering all essential aspects of dogmatic Christology.

The teaching, based on the interpretation of Biblical evidence, that Luther expounded in That Jesus Christ was born a Jew provided in his eyes incontrovertible arguments for Christ being the expected Messiah. For him it was clear from a combination of Biblical tradition and historical experience that the suffering of the Jews during the preceding 1,500 years must be God's punishment on them for denying His Anointed and for the crucifixion: 'Because Scripture and history concur so overwhelmingly, the Jews cannot say anything to contradict this.' In view of this powerful assertion that he knew the truth Luther could not conceive of there being any substantial theological counter-arguments against his Messianic 'proofs'.

The notion that his 'Scriptural proofs' might be considered artificial and arbitrary, in fact be completely unconvincing, was inconceivable to Luther. This prophet of God, tested in the fight against the Roman Antichrist, who relied solely on the text of the Bible, was convinced of his righteousness to a degree hardly seen before in a Scriptural exegete. Luther's claim as an exegete to be in possession of the truth goes to the theological heart of the problem that inevitably confronts us in the topic of 'Luther and the Jews'.

His exhortation to 'kindness' towards the Jews, which shone out the more brightly against the dark background of the treatment they had
received hitherto at the hands of the 'Romans', was without doubt the most important factor in the contemporary impact of his 1523 treatise. This impact was most likely boosted by the fact that Luther's statements setting a fundamental question mark over the ways the Jews had been treated up to that point were placed at the beginning and end of his text. Admittedly, it is also clear as day that for Luther his exegetically laboured, in fact all but incomprehensible, arguments in support of Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah were of central importance and he considered them irrefutable. To him, as well as for Justus Jonas, it was inconceivable that Jews or anyone else could raise substantial objections to them. The only possible response to these 'proofs' could be to yield to the evidence they provided and thus return to the faith of their fathers.

The 'Reformation turn' in the Jewish question presented conversion as the only option. There was no alternative. The system hitherto had consisted of fixed-term toleration based on legal and cultural acceptance of an alien phenomenon. While this toleration, though granted in principle, could be revoked at any time and was of limited duration, the Wittenberg Reformation's claim to be expounding Biblical truth actually intensified the pressure on the Jews.

In principle, for Luther Judaism had ceased to be a legitimate religious option. Through his call for tolerance to enable Christians and Jews to live together he was advocating what could only be a temporary solution. The formulation with which Luther concluded his treatise ('until I can see what effect I have had') spoke of the time-limited nature of that coexistence. Most contemporaries ignored these words, as have virtually all scholars up to now. If, however, that time factor is taken seriously, then 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.

Following the appearance of Luther's treatise there is evidence of an increased interest in the Jews in contemporary popular publications. A number of affordable, unbound 'pamphlets' appeared, mainly written

in the vernacular and only a few pages long, that took up and developed the impetus Luther had given to missionary activity among the Jews. In no period in the sixteenth century was so much published about the Jews than in the 1520s.

The first of this wave of popular writings was a medieval text, Rabbi Samuel's Letter of Instruction to one Rabbi Isaac, in charge of a synagogue in North Africa. This work probably dated from the fourteenth century and had been disseminated before the Reformation in a whole series of Latin and German manuscripts and printed versions. Now, after the publication of Luther's first 'Jewish writing' in 1523, it appeared in a Latin edition and the following year in three separate German translations by supporters of the Reformation: Wenzeslaus Linck, a friend of Luther from the Hermits of St Augustine and now a Protestant pastor, in Altenburg and Nuremberg; Ludwig Hätzer, a one-time Zwinglian, an Anabaptist, and later translator of the Old Testament books of the Prophets, in Zurich and Augsburg; and an anonymous translator in Colmar in Alsace. Later the work was even incorporated into Luther editions as an important text on the subject of Judaism.

What made this work of Rabbi Samuel, a convert to Christianity who was setting up his reasons for converting to his former co-religionist, so interesting to those involved in discussions about the Jews during the Reformation period? It provided an answer, solely on the basis of the Old Testament, to the question of why Israel had been in exile for so long with no prospect of an end. This strategy was the same one Luther had adopted in That Jesus Christ was born a Jew. Samuel saw the reason for this perpetual exile in the fact that the Jews had been responsible for the death of Jesus. As Luther had done, he advanced proof of various teachings of traditional Church Christology from the Old Testament. He also gave plausible accounts of the fate of the Apostles, the successors of the Old Testament prophets, on the basis of Israel's scriptures. The letter therefore represented a hermeneutic and exegetical parallel text to Luther's most successful 'Jewish writing'. It also demonstrates that the extensive exegetical passages in Luther's That Jesus Christ was born a Jew cannot be considered theologically original.
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The fact also that none of the usual anti-Jewish libels and accusations appear in the work can be seen as an important parallel to Luther. These points of agreement show clearly that it would be inappropriate to understand Luther as representing a fundamental break with how the Jews were treated 'in the Middle Ages'. The comparison does however illuminate the one thing that was genuinely new about Luther, namely the call to tolerate the Jews and live together with them.

A curious anonymous pamphlet telling of An Incident Involving a Great Multitude of Jews and their Power, which has long been hidden (Figure 9) is also a product of the growing discussion about the Jews that suddenly developed in 1523. From one point of view this pamphlet contrasted with Luther’s approach to the Jews, for the latter had attempted to demonstrate that the Jews had been deprived long ago of sceptre and crown, in other words of worldly power, as punishment for the crucifixion of Christ. This pamphlet, on the other hand, reported that a powerful Jewish army, which up to that time had been kept hidden, was only a few days’ march from Jerusalem and preparing to reconquer it. Justus Jonas was keenly aware of the contrast with the Wittenberg line. In the foreword to his Latin translation of Luther’s first ‘Jewish writing’ he made a pointedly polemical remark directed against ‘rabbis’ who ‘invented’ stories of ‘the sceptre and state of the Jews having endured in Babylon’. This remark was most probably directed against the pamphlet An Incident Involving a Great Multitude of Jews and the Jewish hopes that had given rise to it.

It is probable that the pamphlet was linked to the activities of a Yemeni Jew named David Reuben, a messianic figure who had been present in Europe from the autumn of 1523 onwards, though rumours and stories about him had been circulating before that. Reuben asserted that he came from the land of Chabor near to the Red Sea. There, he claimed, his brother was the leader of the tribes of Ruben, Gad, and half of Manasseh. He was offering Christians a coalition against the Turks. With letters of introduction from the Pope he travelled to a number of European royal courts and was even received by Emperor Charles V.

Figure 9. Title page of the pamphlet An Incident Involving a Great Multitude of Jews (1523). The picture shows the advance of ‘Red Jews’ into parched and inhospitable terrain.

The background to the pamphlet An Incident Involving a Great Multitude of Jews was the ancient legend of a Jewish nation, enclosed since the time of Alexander the Great and sometimes identified with the mysterious Gog and Magog, the apocalyptic powers mentioned in Ezekiel 38 f. Their
emergence was seen as connected with the apocalyptic revelation of the Antichrist. In the summer of 1523 that moment seemed to have arrived for the pamphlet reported that an enormous army of 500,000 to 600,000 Black and Red Jews from the most remote desert regions had merged and had recently arrived in Egypt. They aimed to take possession again of Palestine, the land of their fathers. To that end an embassy to the 'Turkish Emperor' Suleiman the Magnificent had been established and had demanded its return.

Heavenly signs and other apocalyptic manifestations underlined the fact that time was short. The distanced and factual tone of the pamphlet could not conceal indications of an underlying hope that Israel would be restored and the Jewish faith 'increased'. In essence it gave expression to the hopes and aspirations of the Jews themselves in their oppressed state. The restitution of Israel as depicted here represents a kind of 'counter-programme' to the Reformation hope of significant numbers of Jewish conversions. There is a strong possibility that a document of this kind was inspired and given impetus by the upheaval in western European Christendom, where the Pope had recently been 'revealed' to be the Antichrist, as well as by Luther's call for toleration. In the apocalyptic literature of the time, however, the dominant idea was that the Jews would imminently be annihilated; in the case of texts such as Luther's or Rabbi Samuel's Letter of Instruction it was clear that no end to the exile of the Jews was expected.

Immediately after publication of That Jesus Christ was born a Jew a number of pamphlets in dialogue form appeared that can be seen as providing blueprints for how the 'kind' relations between Christians and Jews advocated by Luther might be realized in practice. The first of these texts, A Discussion about Faith, was written by a pastor named Michael Kramer from Kunitz near Jena in Thuringia (Figure 10). He took up the various reports in An Incident Involving a Great Multitude of Jews and worked them into a discussion he claims to have had in an inn with a rabbi named Jacob von Brucks, who was passing through. The rabbi claimed to be convinced that God had caused the great water, beyond which Jewish forces, cut off from the rest of Israel since the time of the crossing of the Red Sea, were

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Figure 10. Title page of Michael Kramer's pamphlet Ein vererzlgung vom glauben... (Erfurt: M. Maler, 1523), showing the clergyman Kramer and the rabbi Jacob von Brucks engaged in discussion at table.

rallied, to remain calm in the summer of 1523 not just for the length of a Sabbath but for a whole week. Now, he said, the Israelites were advancing on Jerusalem and preparing to take over the Promised Land.

Pastor Kramer's interlocutor had also already heard of a response from Suleiman, who was prepared to sell Palestine to the Jews. They,
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however, preferred to reconquer it. Thus at the very moment Kramer’s pamphlet was published in December 1523, it was suggested to readers, Jews and Turks were fighting over the Promised Land. As a source for the analysis of relations between Christians and Jews in the wake of the publication of Luther’s *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew*, a text known to Kramer, this dialogue is revealing. The first thing of note is a new willingness to engage in discussion; Kramer made use of an unexpected encounter with a Jewish trader passing through and was prepared to give credence to the report that a Jewish army was on the point of reconquering Jerusalem, though he expressly contested the idea that the Jews would again wield a royal sceptre. According to Kramer, the hope of a Jewish Messiah would never be fulfilled, as the Messiah had of course already come in Jesus.

Here we have a Reformation clergyman trying in a positively exemplary fashion to act upon the encouragement given by Luther to behave in a ‘kind’ manner towards the Jews. The debate focused primarily on Old Testament passages, though the Christian theologian repeatedly referred to the New Testament, something that Rabbi Jacob, who was schooled in Hebrew and knew nine languages, would not accept. By contrast with medieval dialogues this discussion did not of course lead to any conversion, but both parties treated each other with respect, each interceding for the other in his error, and shook hands. As there can be no serious doubt that this dialogue took place, it reflects a new openness in relations with the Jews, which Luther’s treatise had brought about.

The same can be said of two further Reformation dialogue pamphlets. February 1524 saw the publication of a *Discussion between a Christian and a Jew, also an Innkeeper*. In this case it is more difficult to decide whether it contains a core of historical fact. The parties had coincided in an inn at the gates of Nuremberg. The Jewish interlocutor had with him an unusual picture that he had acquired on his journey. This image is used in the discussion as a didactic tool to demonstrate that Christ is the ‘cornerstone’ in whom the prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled. The dialogue assumed that in the readers’ own day and as shown by Luther, the witness called by God, an apocalyptic decision was imminent, when the Jews would be compelled to take a definitive standpoint regarding Christ. Admittedly, the Jewish participant was not converted and the discussion showed with increasing clarity that the Jews were unable or unwilling to grasp the reason for their exile, namely their rejection of Jesus, the true Messiah. They would remain obstinate to the end of time.

In the late 1520s Pastor Kaspar Güttel, a close associate of Luther from Eisleben, produced an edition of a dialogue entitled *On Punishments and Plagues* in the form of a ‘pleasant’ conversation written in a somewhat calmer tone. It appeared at a moment when energetic strides were being made in doctrinal instruction in Christian society. Güttel carried these efforts over, so to speak, to relations with the Jews and the dialogue culminated in a conversion. Luther’s *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew* naturally formed the background to Güttel’s work, and in fact he even cites it. The Jewish participant was also familiar with it, attesting that the whole world was talking about it and finally admitting that it had prompted him to seek dialogue with a pious Christian. It cannot be ruled out that conversations that actually took place formed the background to Güttel’s dialogue. The Christian participant strongly emphasized that he had always disapproved of the way the Jews had been treated. In other respects, this text was more akin to an exemplar; the Old Testament verses crucial to the ‘work of convincing’ the Jews were presented as a concise compilation in a catechistic form. In other words, a helping hand was given to show how ‘it should be done’.

This text, published some years after Luther’s, was an attempt to give new impetus to the faltering Reformation project of a ‘mission to the Jews’. Urbanus Rhegius, Superintendent* of Brunswick-Lüneburg, also tried to play a part. In 1535 he wrote a letter in Hebrew to the Brunswick Jews in which he tried to make an impression on them using the verses to which Luther had given central importance. These examples indicate that in the wake of Luther’s first treatise there were

* Translators’ note: a leadership role in the Lutheran Church roughly equivalent to that of bishop.
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indeed concerted efforts to win Jews over to Protestant Christianity by means of Old Testament texts interpreted in the light of Christology. Nothing is known, however, of significant numbers of conversions of 'some of these'.

In view of contemporary circumstances, we can assume that in the cities and territories that embraced the Reformation in the course of the 1520s a procedure was adopted that reflected Luther's suggestions of 1523. Evidence from before the latter half of the 1520s that consideration was being given to granting Jews the right to reside or to broaching the subject is not available. Perhaps it can also be assumed that Luther's translation of the Old Testament into German, which began briskly and then got ever slower (the first five books of Moses, the Pentateuch, had been published in 1523, in 1524 the historical (Joshua to Esther) and poetry books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon)), fostered the notion in wider Protestant circles that the Old Testament was essentially a profoundly 'Christian' book, one that Christians saw as 'their own'. Luther had after all translated the Old Testament using unusually colourful, vigorous, poetic language full of images, so making the text his own and opening it up to readers. For German-speaking Protestant Christians he had made the Jews' book into a book they could read and make their companion. Yet the more 'Christian', familiar, and 'their own' the Old Testament became, the more incomprehensible the refusal of the Jews to accept the only possible religious conclusion, namely conversion, inevitably appeared.

Luther and his circle of assistants in Wittenberg had had great difficulties with translating the Old Testament prophets and it was not until 1532 that the 'prophets all in German' were on the market. The first Reformation translation of the prophets, the so-called 'Worms Prophets', had, however, been published five years earlier. It was the work of Hans Denck and Ludwig Hätzer, radical dissenters and Anabaptists with a humanist educational background, who had been supported in their work by rabbis from the large Jewish community in Worms, something that Luther publicly criticized in 1530, as their strict adherence to the letter of the text limited how far it could be read in Christian terms: 'But Jews have had a hand in it and they have not greatly honoured Christ, though in other respects skill and application were evident enough.' The 'heterodox' contacts between the Jews and the world of Anabaptists and radical dissenters were also thrown into sharp relief by the new turn in the history of relations between Christians and Jews brought about by Luther's call of 1523.

There are no indications that in the cities and territories that had adopted the Reformation the old accusations of well-poisoning, desecration of the host, or ritual murder were renewed and threatened Jewish life. In the case of the Nuremberg reformer Andreas Osiander, a theologian and highly competent Hebrew scholar strongly influenced by Reuchlin, there is evidence in a report that in 1529 he spoke out decisively against ritual murder. In Pöing, a small village near Pressburg [Bratislava], Jews had been accused of the murder of a nine-year-old boy (Figure 11). Osiander was unable to prevent the execution of thirty Jews. His report, which also appeared anonymously in print, proved the absurd nature of the charges principally with reference to Old Testament commandments. He also demonstrated that not even hate-filled converts from Judaism confirmed this most heinous and dangerous of all calumnies against the Jews.

A little over a decade later Jews made use of this report in order to defend themselves against a recent accusation of ritual murder made in the wake of a child murder in Sappenfeld near Eichstätt in Bavaria. Now it was the turn of Johannes Eck, the champion of the old faith, to demonstrate that the trials for ritual murder were warranted in opposition to Osiander, the 'protector of Jews' and 'Lutheran scoundrel'. From the perspective of the 'old faith' too there was a clear conviction that the Reformation movement presented itself as 'friendly to the Jews' in a way that broke with the received tradition. No-one had done more to encourage this than Luther and he would be the one who later changed it.

To return to the subject of Bernhard, it proved impossible for this first Reformation convert from Judaism, who had in the meantime been employed as a messenger to Osiander, to integrate himself in a lasting manner into society. It may be that Bernhard's mobile way of earning a
Ein erstickendlich getroffen und
Mord / so von den Juden zu
Pöing (ein Markt in Ungarn gelegen) an einem
Nachtfärigen Anälein begangen, wie sie das gleiche
sich gemäert/geschlagen / geschoren und
einredt haben. Darumb dann es in die dreissig Jü-
den/Hand und Weibs personen/ und zehn misshänd

Forn und getalt eines Weiller
damit sie das Kind gemäert haben.

Figure 11. Title page of an anonymous pamphlet recounting a ritual murder in Pöing in Hungary.

living was connected to the fact that he was supposed or wished to be
something of a 'missionary to the Jews', visiting his former co-religionists
and trying to acquaint them in 'precise' fashion with the Old Testament
'proofs' for the Son of God born of a virgin. A letter of Luther's from the
summer of 1535 shows that Justus Jonas had asked him repeatedly to
support Bernhard. Luther, however, was surprised that 'this strong man

with a strong wife' was 'suffering unduly from poverty', and though
he gave an assurance that he would gladly support this man who was a
'guest in the Gentile church and at home in the Jewish church' (in ecclesia
gentium hospiti et in ecclesia Iudaeae domestico) he did not find himself in a
position to do so at that time. 'The Israelite', as Bernhard was known,
had obviously become a 'welfare case'. Thus Luther, who twelve years
earlier had drawn attention internationally to the success, as demon-
strated by Bernhard himself, of his Gospel in achieving the proper
conversion of the Jews, now conceded no more than the status of a
'guest' to this man born a Jew in the 'church of the Gentiles'. The hope
that Christ would become known to other Jews through Bernhard's
'example and actions' had clearly not been fulfilled.

The time when Luther was to see what 'effect' he had had was
approaching.