The Jews in Christian Europe

A Source Book · 315–1791

Jacob Rader Marcus
Marc Saperstein

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE PRESS
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH PRESS
33

Martin Luther and the Jews

1533–1543

The struggle in Germany between Johannes Reuchlin and the Dominicans on the question of the preservation of certain rabbinic writings led in part to the formation of a large body of public opinion that was decidedly anti-Catholic. It was this anti-Catholic group which Martin Luther (1483–1546), a monk, railed against himself when he initiated the Protestant Revolution in 1517.

In a work written as early as 1533, That Jesus Christ Was a Born a Jew, Luther was very sympathetic to the Jews because he hoped that he might induce them to become Protestants and thus prove to the world the superiority of Protestantism over Catholicism. This book appears to have been widely read, for there were in the first year of publication nine German prints in addition to a Latin edition.

Late in life Luther turned bitter against the Jews. The causes were many: the Jews did not flock to his new Christianity; on the contrary, they even presumed, occasionally, to convert Christians and dared even to argue with him on theological matters. Some radical Protestant groups were appropriating Jewish practices, such as the observance of the Sabbath (on Saturday) as a day of rest. Luther's growing bitterness and sense of disillusionment finally vented itself in 1543 in a series of German anti-Jewish writings of which Concerning the Jews and Their Lies is a notorious example. There are no more bitterly anti-Jewish statements in all Christian literature than those which may be found in these writings of the disappointed rebel. Most of his attacks were not original; they are drawn from older medieval writings, some of which come from the pens of apostate Jews. But the sustained anti-Jewish rhetoric mobilized by such an influential leader was certainly noteworthy.

33.1 From That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew, 1533

I will therefore show by means of the Bible the causes which induce me to believe that Christ was a Jew born of a virgin. Perhaps I will attract some of the Jews to the Christian faith. For our fools—the popes, bishops, bishops, and monks—the coarse blockheads! have until this time so treated the Jews that to be a good Christian one would have to become a Jew. And if I had been a Jew and had seen such idiots and blockheads ruling and teaching the Christian religion, I would rather have been a sow than a Christian.1

For they have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs and not human beings. They have done nothing for them but curse them and seize their wealth. Whenever they converted them, they did not teach them either true Christian law or life, but only subjected them to papistry and mockery. When these Jews saw that Judaism had such strong scriptural basis and that Christianity (Catholicism) was pure nonsense without biblical support, how could they quiet their hearts and become genuine good Christians? I have myself heard from pious converted Jews that if they had not heard the Gospel in our time [from us Lutherans] they would always have remained Jews at heart in spite of their conversion. For they admit that they have never heard anything about Christ from the rulers who have converted them.

I hope that, if the Jews are treated in a friendly manner and are instructed kindly through the Bible, many of them will become true Christians and return to the ancestral faith of the prophets and patriarchs. 2

I would advise and beg everybody to deal kindly with the Jews and to instruct them in the Scriptures; in such a case we could expect them to

1 The argument is that there is no hope of converting Jews to the Christianity represented by the Roman Catholic Church, only to a reformed and purified Christianity, more closely connected with the Hebrew Scriptures.

2 Luther considered the Jews of the Old Testament to have been good Christians.
come ever to us. If, however, we use brute force and slander them, saying that they need the blood of Christians to get rid of their stench and I know not what other nonsense of that kind, and treat them like dogs, what good can we expect of them? Finally, how can we expect them to improve if we forbid them to work among us and to have social intercourse with us, and so force them into obscurity?

If we wish to make them better, we must deal with them not according to the law of the pope, but according to the law of Christian charity. We must receive them kindly and allow them to compete with us in earning a livelihood, so that they may have a good reason to be with us and among us and an opportunity to witness Christian life and doctrine. And if some remain obstinate, what of it? Not every one of us is a good Christian.

I shall stop here now until I see what the results will be. May God be gracious to us all. Amen.

33.2 From On the Jews and their Lies, 1543*

I say, before they [the Jews] would have us Gentiles—whom they incessantly mock, curse, damn, defame, and revile⁶—share the Messiah with them, and be called their co-heirs and brethren, they would crucify ten more Messiahs and kill God himself if this were possible, together with all angels and all creatures, even at the risk of incurring the penalty of a thousand hells instead of one. Such an incomprensibly stubborn pride dwells in the noble blood of the fathers and circumcised saints. They alone want to have the Messiah and be masters of the world.⁶ The accursed Goyim must be servants,⁷ give

---

3 Medieval Christians believed in a "Jewish stench" (see also Chapter 19). Note that the blood libel accusation mentioned (but repudiated) here is not about the use of Christian blood for the Passover holiday, but rather for medicinal purposes.

4 Copyright © Augsburg Fortress.

5 That all Jews harbor an intractable hatred for all gentiles is an assertion that underlies much of this text. It was not uncommon among medieval Christian writers, but rarely if ever stated with such venomous certainty as it is by Luther.

6 Here is an important conceptual issue about the Jewish understanding of the fate of gentiles in the messianic age. Shortly before this passage, Luther quoted the messianic verses from Isaiah 52:13 and Micah 4:5, arguing that Jews "cannot endure that we gentiles should be their equal before God and that the messiah should be our comfort and joy as well as theirs." This issue was indeed a matter of contention among Jewish thinkers.

7 This important theme is based on a talmudic statement that the essential difference between the messianic age and the present will be "the servitude of the gentile kingdoms" (shehavat Melissa) (B. Sanhedrin 104a). This is usually understood to mean the end of Jewish

---

their desire (that is their gold and silver) to the Jews [echoing Hag. 1:7], and let themselves be slaughtered like wretched cattle. They would rather remain lost consciously and eternally than give up this view.

From their youth they have imbibed such venomous hatred against the Goyim from their parents and their rabbis, and they still continuously drink it. As Psalm 109:18 declares, it has penetrated flesh and blood, marrow and bone, and has become part and parcel of their nature and their life. And as little as they can change flesh and blood, marrow and bone, so little can they change such pride and enmity. They must remain thus and perilous, unless God performs extraordinarily great miracles.⁴ If I wished to vex and anger a Jew severely, I would say, "Listen, Jew: do you realize that I am a real brother of all the holy children of Israel and the co-heir in the kingdom of the true Messiah?" Without doubt, I would meet with a nasty rebuff. If he could stare at me with the eyes of a basilisk, he would surely do it.⁷ And all the devils could not execute the evil he would wish me, even if God were to give them leave—of that I am certain. However, I shall refrain from doing this, and I ask also that no one else do so, for Christ's sake.

Therefore, dear Christian, be advised and do not doubt that next to the devil, you have no more bitter, venomous, and vehement foe than a real Jew who earnestly seeks to be a Jew. There may perhaps be some among them who believe what a cow or goose believes, but their lineage and circumcision infects them all. Therefore the history books often accuse them of contaminating wells, of kidnapping and piercing children, as for example at Trent, Weisensee, etc.⁸ They of course deny this. Whether it is true or not, I do know that they do not lack the complete, full, and ready will to do such things either secretly or openly where possible.¹¹ This you can assuredly expect from them, and you must govern yourselves accordingly.

If they perform some good deed, you may rest assured that they are

---

servitude to the gentiles. But some have understood it to mean that the gentiles will be in servitude to the Jews.

8 Jews are thus incapable of reforming their attitudes and behavior; they can be saved only through the miracle of divine grace through conversion to Christianity.

9 It was commonly believed (going back to antiquity) that looking into the eyes of a basilisk would be fatal.

10 See Chapters 14 and 14. The Weisensee accusation was made in 1532; the Trent ritual murder charge was adjudicated in a causer célèbre in 1475.

11 By contrast with his statement twenty years earlier that such accusations were slander and nonsense, here he takes an agonistic position on the accuracy of the reports, but a firm position on Jewish willingness to commit such acts.
not prompted by love, nor is it done with your benefit in mind. Since they are compelled to live among us, they do this for reasons of expediency, but their heart remains and is as I have described it. If you do not want to believe me, read Lyra, Burgasius, and other truthful and honest men. And even if they had not recorded it, you would find that Scripture tells of the two seeds, the serpent’s and the woman’s. It says that these are enemies (Gen. 3:15), and that God and the devil are at variance with each other. Their own writings and prayer books also state this plainly enough.

A person who is unacquainted with the devil might wonder why they are so particularly hostile toward Christians. They have no reason to act this way, since we show them every kindness. They live among us, enjoy our shield and protection, they use our country and our highways, our markets and streets. Meanwhile our princes and rulers sit there and moth with mouths hanging open and permit the Jews to take, steal, and rob from their open money-bags and treasures whatever they want. That is, they let the Jews, by means of their usury, skin and fleece them and their subjects and make them beggars with their own money. For the Jews, who are exiles, should really have nothing, and whatever they have must surely be our property. They do not work, and they do not earn anything from us, nor do we give or present it to them, and yet they are in possession of our money and goods and are our masters in our own country and in their exile. A thief is condemned to hang for the theft of ten florins, and if he robs anyone on the highway, he forfeits his head. But when a Jew steals and robs ten tons of gold through his usury, he is more highly esteemed than God himself.

In proof of this we cite the bold boast with which they strengthen their faith and give vent to their venomous hatred of us, as they say among themselves, "Be patient and see how God is with us, and does not desert his people even in exile. We do not labor, and yet we enjoy prosperity and leisure. The accursed Gojim have to work for us, but we get their money. This makes us their masters and them our servants. Be patient, dear children of Israel, better times are in store for us, our Messiah will still come if we continue thus and acquire the cheddah [wealth] of all the gentiles [Hag. 3:7] by usury and other methods." Alas, this is what we endure for them. They are under our shield and protection, and yet, as I have said, they curse us...

In addition, no one is holding them here now. The country and the roads are open for them to proceed to their land whenever they wish. If they did so, we would be glad to present gifts to them on the occasion; it would be good riddance. For they are a heavy burden, a plague, a pestilence, a sheer misfortune for our country. Proof for this is found in the fact that they have often been expelled forcibly from a country, far from being held captive in it. . . .

What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? Since they live among us, we dare not tolerate their conduct, now that we are aware of their lying and reviling and blasphemying. If we do, we become sharers in their lies, cursing, and blasphemy. Thus we cannot extinguish the un speachable fire of divine wrath, of which the prophets speak, nor can we convert the Jews. With prayer and the fear of God we much practice a sharp mercy to see whether we might save at least a few from the glowing flames. We dare not avenge ourselves. Vengeance a thousand times worse than we could wish them already has them by the throat. I shall give you my sincere advice:

First, to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blasphemying of His Son and His Christians. . . .

Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. For they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues. Instead they might be lodged under a roof or in a barn, like the gypsies. This will bring home to them the fact that they are not masters in our country, as they boast, but that they are living in exile and in captivity, as they incessantly wall and lament about us before God.

Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them. . . .

Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limbs . . . .

13 Luther appears to be referring to the concept in Jewish law that certain beneficial acts toward gentiles are to be taken not because they are strictly required by Jewish law, but in order to foster peaceful relations with them (nephiq darkei sheolon).

14 Nicholas of Lyra, a scholar who used Rashi’s commentaries extensively in his work, was also capable of occasional disparagements of Jews so nourished from infancy with hatred of gentiles. “Burgasius” apparently refers to Alber of Burgos, a convert whose “campaign against the Jews” is described at length by Bar, A History of the Jews in Christian Spain (Philadelphia: JPS, 1967–68), 1:107–84.

15 One of the strongest condemnations of Jewish economic activity in the literature of antisemitism
Fifth, I advise that safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews. For they have no business in the country-side, since they are not lords, officials, traders, or the like. Let them stay at home. I have heard it said that a rich Jew is now travelling across the country with twelve horses - his ambition is to be a Kukkha - devoting princes, lords, lands, and people with his usury, so that the great lords view it with jealous eyes. If you great lords and princes will not forbid such usurers the highway legally, some day a troop may gather against them, having learned from this booklet the true nature of the Jews and how one should deal with them and not protect their activities. For you, too, must not and cannot protect them unless you wish to become participants in all their abominations.  

Sixth, I advise that usury be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping. The reason for such a measure is that, as said above, they have no other means of earning a livelihood than usury, and by it they have stolen and robbed from us all they possess. Such money should now be used in no other way than the following: Whenever a Jew is sincerely converted, he should be handed one hundred, two hundred, or three hundred florins, as personal circumstances may suggest. With this he could set himself up in some occupation for the support of his poor wife and children, and the maintenance of the old or feeble. For such evil gains are cursed if they are not put to use with God’s blessing in a good and worthy cause.

Seventh, I recommend putting a blade, an ax, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the hands of young, strong Jews and Jewesses and letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow, as was imposed on the children of Adam (Gen. 3:19). For it is not fitting that they should let us accursed Goyim toil in the sweat of our faces while they, the holy people, idle away their time beholding the stove, feasting and fretting, and on top of all, boasting blasphemously of their lordship over the Christians by means of our sweat. No, one should toss out these lazy rogues by the seat of their pants.

But if we are afraid that they might harm us or our wives, children, servants, cattle, etc., if they had to serve and work for us - for it is reasonable to assume

---

16 This was the wealthy Michael, court Jew of Jochaim of Brandenburg, a famous commercial magnate of the time.
17 Luther seems to be accusing the nobles’ habit to attack the Jews on the roads. Michael, the wealthy Jew, was actually tried in 1549 by highwaymen acting as agents for some of the most prominent citizens of Magdeburg.
18 Usury means here any degree of interest, not only an exorbitant rate.
19 Luther had no authority to put his seven principles into effect; he was dependent on implementation by the political rulers, who had very little inclination to follow his advice in this matter.