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Martin Luther and the Jews

1523-1543

THE struggle in Germany between Johannes Reuchlin and the Dominicans on the question of the preservation of some 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, rallied about himself when he initiated the Protestant Revolution in 1517.

In a work written as early as 1523, *That Jesus Christ Was a Born 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 to argue even with him on matters theological. Also, he was a sick man. His 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. His attacks were not original: they are drawn from older medieval writings some of which come from the pens of apostate Jews.

Josel of Rosheim, the Jewish advocate, protested vigorously against this bitter attack of Luther which, it seems, confirmed the exclusion of the Jews from Electoral Saxony and brought about a deterioration of their position in Hesse. Though unsuccessful in these two lands Josel did receive (1546) a charter from the Emperor Charles V which confirmed the rights and privileges of Jews throughout the German Empire.

Luther's anti-Jewish essays are still a frequently quoted source for modern anti-Semites.

I. THAT JESUS CHRIST WAS BORN A JEW—1523

¶ 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, sophists, 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.

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 Christian law or life but only subjected them to papistry and monkey. 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 real, 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 friendly and are instructed kindly through the Bible, many of them will become real Christians and come back to the ancestral faith of the prophets and patriarchs. . . . [Luther considered the heroes of the Old Testament good Christians.]

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 come over 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? [Medieval Christians believed in a *Foetor Judaicus*, a "Jewish stench."] 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 usury?

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.

II. CONCERNING THE JEWS AND THEIR LIES—1543

¶ What then shall we Christians do with this damned, rejected race of Jews? [The Jews were rejected by God since they refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah.] Since they live among us and we know about their lying and blasphemy and cursing, we can not tolerate them if we do not wish to share in their lies, curses, and blasphemy. In this way we cannot quench the inextinguishable fire of divine rage (as the prophets say) nor convert the Jews. We must prayerfully and reverentially practice a merciful severity. Perhaps we may save a few from the fire and the flames [of hell]. We must not seek vengeance. They are surely being punished a thousand times more than we might wish them. Let me give you my honest advice.

First, their synagogues or churches should be set on fire, and whatever does not burn up should be covered or spread over with dirt so that no one may ever be able to see a cinder or stone of it. And this ought to be done for the honor of God and of Christianity in order that God may see that we are Christians, and that we have not willingly tolerated or approved of such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of His Son and His Christians. . . . [Luther and others believed that the Jews cursed the Christians in their daily prayers.]

Secondly, their homes should likewise be broken down and destroyed. For they perpetrate the same things there that they do in their synagogues. For this reason they ought to be put under one roof or in a stable, like gypsies, in order that they may realize that they are not masters in our land, as they boast, but miserable captives, as they complain of us incessantly before God with bitter wailing.

Thirdly, they should be deprived of their prayer-books and Tal-muds in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught. Fourthly, their rabbis must be forbidden under threat of death to teach any more. . . .

Fifthly, passport and traveling privileges should be absolutely forbidden to the Jews. For they have no business in the rural districts since they are not nobles, nor officials, nor merchants, nor the like.

Let them stay at home. I have heard that there is a rich Jew riding around the country with a team of twelve horses—he wants to be a Messiah—and he is exploiting princes, nobles, land, and people to such an extent that important people look askance at this. [This was “the wealthy Michael,” court-Jew of Joachim II of Brandenburg, a famous commercial magnate of the time.] If you princes and nobles do not close the road legally to such exploiters, then some troop ought to ride against them, for they will learn from this pamphlet what the Jews are and how to handle them and that they ought not to be protected. You ought not, you cannot protect them, unless in the eyes of God you want to share all their abomination. . . . [Luther seems to be inciting the robber barons to attack the Jews on the roads. Michael, the wealthy Jew, was actually seized in 1549 by highwaymen acting as agents for some of the most prominent citizens of Magdeburg.]

Sixthly, they ought to be stopped from usury. [Usury means any degree of interest, not only an exorbitant rate.] All their cash and valuables of silver and gold ought to be taken from them and put aside for safe keeping. For this reason, as said before, everything that they possess they stole and robbed from us through their usury, for they have no other means of support. This money should be used in the case (and in no other) where a Jew has honestly become a Christian, so that he may get for the time being one or two or three hundred florins, as the person may require. This, in order that he may start a business to support his poor wife and children and the old and feeble. Such evilly acquired money is cursed, unless, with God's blessing, it is put to some good and necessary use. . . . Seventhly, let the young and strong Jews and Jewesses be given the flail, the ax, the hoe, the spade, the distaff, and spindle, and let them earn their bread by the sweat of their noses as is enjoined upon Adam's children. For it is not proper that they should want us cursed *Goyim* [Gentiles] to work in the sweat of our brow and that they, pious crew, idle away their days at the fireside in laziness, feasting, and display. And in addition to this, they boast impiously that they have become masters of the Christians at our expense. We ought to drive the rascally lazy bones out of our system.

If, however, we are afraid that they might harm us personally, or our wives, children, servants, cattle, etc. when they serve us or work for us—since it is surely to be presumed that such noble lords of the world and poisonous bitter worms are not accustomed to any work and would very unwillingly humble themselves to such a degree among the cursed *Goyim*—then let us apply the same clever-

ness [expulsion] as the other nations, such as France, Spain, Bohemia, etc., and settle with them for that which they have extorted usuriously from us, and after having divided it up fairly let us drive them out of the country for all time. For, as has been said, God's rage is so great against them that they only become worse and worse through mild mercy, and not much better through severe mercy. Therefore away with them. . . .

To sum up, dear princes and nobles who have Jews in your domains, if this advice of mine does not suit you, then find a better one so that you and we may all be free of this insufferable devilish burden—the Jews.

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