

“Therefore, away with them“

Luther’s Fall with regard to the Jews



Conception and realization: Hans-Georg Vorndran
Translated into English: Phil Schmidt
Text in italic: Original Luther’s Words

1. Title panel

2. Hope of conversion

The early Luther found friendly words for the Jews, recognizing that the Messiah came from their ethnic community. Accordingly, he wrote a treatise with the title: “That Jesus Christ was born a Jew” (1523). He urged that the Jews be treated with Christian love, that they be integrated into society, that they have open access to craftsmanship professions, which had been denied them in the Middle Ages due to a Papal edict (4th Lateran Council, 1215). However, this friendliness was not entirely altruistic: its intention was to encourage the Jews to be open to the Christian message and to move them to forsake their “unbelief” and their “stubbornness”. Luther put great hopes in his recently published translation of the New Testament, in which the Jews could now, finally, read for themselves that Jesus is the Messiah whom the prophets had promised.

When this appeal was not successful, Luther became reproachful and insulting.

Stefan Meißner, Disappointed Love? Martin Luther and the Jews

I hope that if one treats the Jews with friendliness and instructs them clearly on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, that many will become real Christians and return to the faith of their Fathers, Prophets and Patriarchs. (...)

And however highly we regard ourselves, we are nevertheless heathens, for the Jews belong to the family tree of Christ: we are brothers-in-laws and strangers; they are blood relations, cousins and brothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, whoever wants to boast about flesh-and-blood ties has to acknowledge that the Jews are closer to Christ than we are, as St. Paul says in Romans 9 (v. 5). (...)

Thus, my request and my advice is that one should handle them with correctness and instruct them according to the Scriptures, so that some of them would want to join us. But since we deal with them violently and spread lies about them, claiming that since they do not have Christian blood they stink, - and who knows what other nonsense is being propagated! - so that they are treated like dogs, how can we expect to facilitate goodness in them? For example: that we forbid them to work among us, to be occupied and to enjoy human fellowship, has driven them to usury: how is that supposed to improve them?

Whoever wants to help them has to apply the Christian law of love, not the stipulations of the pope, and accept them with friendliness. (...) Though some may be obstinate, what does it matter? Are all of us good Christians? From now on, I will say no more until I have seen the results of my efforts.

Martin Luther, “That Jesus Christ was born a Jew” 1523

3. The unequivocal certainty of Scripture

Not only the recently translated New Testament, but also the entire shared Scripture, must, according to Luther, inevitably lead Jews and Christians to the same interpretation. The Scripture is obvious and unmistakable – he believed unreservedly that Scripture is self-explanatory.

Luther speaks “on behalf of others”, which means on behalf of the Jews. He takes a stand regarding the Jewish people, from whom Jesus emanated. He takes a look at Jesus’ family members, the Jews. He wants to “relate the reasons, on the basis of Scripture, which move me to believe that Christ is a Jew, born of a virgin.”

He is as resolute as the Humanists of his time in his use of sources – back to the roots! He stands on the foundation of Holy Scripture, he interprets it, and he is completely certain that anyone who reads and takes the Scriptures seriously must come to the same conclusion, namely, that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah of the First Testament. Neither pope nor government is a prerequisite for making this discovery. God’s Word travels across the country, if it is allowed to move freely. God’s Word is now accessible to all. It does not require further instruction, it requires only discipleship. He trusts implicitly that the truth will make itself known – without the need for pressure or violence. One year earlier he preached in Wittenberg: ‘The Word of God moves of its own power across the country, while I drink Wittenberg’s beer’.

Martin Stöhr, Luther’s Fall, in: Blickpunkte (Perspectives) 3 / 2012

*From a lecture on the Letter to the Romans, 1515/16;
concerning Romans 11:22*

In contradiction to this, many become conceited, displaying an incredible stupidity and refer to the Jews, at times, as dogs or as damned or shout obscenities at them, although they themselves have no idea what kind of people they are and what their condition is before God. In their insolence they go out of control, curse and slander (the Jews), whereas they themselves should fear that they deserve to suffer a similar fate. But the opposite is the case: they act as though they were sure about themselves and the others, calling themselves the blessed and the others the cursed. The Cologne theologians belong to this sort with their thoughtless zeal; in their articles and even more so in their inarticulate utterances, they are not ashamed to call the Jews the damned. Why is that? Because they have forgotten that it is written: “Bless and do not curse!” (Romans 12:14). And in another place: “We are reviled, and we bless; we are slandered and we admonish” (1. Corinthians 4: 12f). They want to convert the Jews with force; may God resist them.

WA 56, 436

4. The Jewish Pig

On our parish church here in Wittenberg one can see a pig, carved in stone. Under the pig, sucking, are young piglets and Jews. Behind the pig is a Rabbi, who lifts up the right leg and with his left hand pulls the tail over himself; he bends and stares zealously under the tail into the Talmud, as though he wanted to see and read something which is acutely important and special. From this image they certainly got their Schem Hamphoras... This is a German expression for someone who without justification pretends to be wise. So it is said: “Where did he read it? In the pig’s backside...”

WA 53, 600-601, quoted according to Bienert, *Martin Luther and the Jews*, 165

Contemporary sign below the Jewish Pig in Wittenberg, attached by the congregation:

“God’s actual name, the maligned Schem Hamphoras, whom the Jews kept in virtually unspoken holiness before Christians, died in 6 million Jews under the sign of the cross.”

Declaration of the Berlin-Brandenburg Synod 1990:

“In those places at which (anti-Jewish) artworks remain in place, there should be information for visitors (also in the form of plaques), which make them aware of the guilt and consternation of the church and which facilitate new perceptions.”

The inscription “Rabini, Schem Ha Mphoras”, which was placed subsequently above the “Jewish Pig” at the southwest corner of the City Church of Wittenberg, points to Jewish mysticism, which derives assertions about the nature of God from combinations of words and numbers. The letter sequence of “Schem Ha Mphoras” (Hebrew: “the unaltered name”) had the power to perform miracles, according to the belief of Jewish Cabbalists. The inexpressible name of God was thus regarded as especially holy and was hidden from the uninitiated. The inscription above the “Jewish Pig” means accordingly: “This is a depiction of the inexpressible, holy name of the Rabbis’ God.”

Oliver Gussmann, The so-called “Jewish Pig”, Materialdienst 2/2003

“Jewish pigs” widespread:

1. Aarschot (Church of Our Lady)
2. Xanten (Cathedral)
3. Cologne (Cathedral)
4. Lemgo (St. Mary’s Church)
5. Heiligenstadt (St. Anne Chapel)
6. Erfurt (Cathedral)
7. Magdeburg (Cathedral)
8. Calbe (St. Stephen’s Church)
9. Zerbst (Nikolai Church)
10. Wittenberg (City Church)
11. Brandenburg on the Havel (Cathedral)
12. Eberswalde (St Mary Magdalene)
13. Gnesen (Cathedral)
14. Metz (Cathedral)
15. Colmar (Minster St. Martin)
16. Basel (Minster) removed
17. Frankfurt / Main (Old Bridge Tower) removed
18. Bad Wimpfen (Donor Church)
19. Bamberg (Cathedral)
20. Bayreuth (City Church) removed
21. Cadolzburg (Cadolz Fortress)
22. Nürnberg (St. Sebald)
23. Heilbronn (Minster)
24. Spalt (private home)
25. Spalt / District Theilenberg (Church)
26. Kelheim (City Pharmacy) removed
27. Regensburg (Cathedral)
28. Freising (Cathedral) removed
29. Salzburg (City Hall tower) removed
30. Vienna Neustadt (Museum)

5. Luther’s seven suggestions

*How do we Christians want to deal with this outcast, damned Jewish people?
I want to give my sincere recommendations.*

First, their synagogues or schools should be set on fire, and whatever does not burn should be covered with earth, so that no one will ever again see a stone or clinker of them. And such things should be done

to honor our Lord and Christianity, so that God will see that we are Christians and that we have not consciously allowed or condoned public lies, curses and insults against his Son and his Christians.

...

In addition, their homes should also be broken down and demolished, because they do the same in them that they do in the schools. Subsequently, they could be housed in lean-to's or stables, living like Gypsies, so that they know that they are not lords in our country...

Third, their prayer books and Talmuds should be taken from them, which teach them idolatry, lies, curses and insults.

Fourth, under threat of bodily harm and loss of life, their Rabbis should be forbidden to teach, because they have lost the right to this position...

Fifth, the Jews should no longer be allowed to show themselves in public, because they have no occupations; they are neither lords nor officials nor traders nor anything comparable; they should stay at home...

Sixth, they should be forbidden to practice usury; all of their money and items of silver and gold should be taken away from them, to be set aside in a safe place. And this is the reason: all that they have (as mentioned above) has been stolen and robbed from us by means of their usury, because they have no other way of feeding themselves...

Seventh, the young, strong Jewish men and women should be given flails, axes, pickaxes, hoes, shovels, spinning wheels and spindles, and let them earn their bread with sweat coming out of their noses...For it is not acceptable that they expect us damned Gojim (Hebrew term for Non-Jews) to work with sweat on our faces, whereas they, the holy people, want to sit behind the oven in daily laziness, reveling in burping and farting...

For, as we heard, God's wrath upon them is great, so that lenient mercy makes them worse and worse, but severity hardly improves them. Therefore, away with them!

*"Concerning the Jews and their Lies", a writing of Martin Luther from the year 1543.
Martin Luther, Selected Works, Supplementary Series, 3. Volume, Munich, 1938, page 189f.*

6 Josel of Rosheim counters against Luther

Josel von Rosheim, an unofficial speaker for German Judaism, asks Luther to intercede with the Elector of Saxony, that he would repeal the travel restrictions and other harassments directed against the Jews. Luther, however, rebuffed the supplicant and wrote a letter to Josel, explaining why he could not apply to the government on behalf of the Jews: they, the Jews, had not accepted their fellow-Jew, Jesus.

To the wise Josel, Jew of Rosheim, my good friend.

My dear Josel! (...)

Therefore, do not consider us Christians to be fools and geese, but contemplate once again that for over 1500 years God has wanted to free you from misery, to help you, but this cannot come about unless you accept, along with us heathen, your relative and Lord, the dear crucified Jesus.

For you see that your captivity lasts too long, so look with favor on us heathen, whom you Jews consider to be your enemies, and accept our advice and help; but we cannot tolerate that you curse and insult

your own flesh and blood, who did you no harm, Jesus of Nazareth; and if you could, you would take away everything from those who belong to him, what they are and what they have.

Luther's letter from June 11, 1537

Josel von Rosheim approached the City Council of Strasbourg in 1543 with three applications, attempting to prohibit the distribution of Luther's harsh publications. He characterized Luther's writing "Concerning the Jews and their Lies" as "such a crude, inhuman book, with reproach and slander" (...). Since "it occurs again and again in the country" that people, referring to Luther, "defame and slander" the Jews and even threaten that "they shall be – and ought to be - killed"; further distribution of Luther's writing must be prohibited, "so that we unfortunate people shall not be harmed by the ignorant." He is prepared to debate with Luther "orally, and also in writing, on the basis of Holy Scripture".

Near the end of his life, Josel assumed a genuinely antagonistic stance with regard to the Reformation, which he saw as a threat to public order.

Josel classified Luther as "an impure man"; this is based on a Hebrew play of words, in which Luther is transcribed as "Lo-Thahor" – meaning "the impure".

Andreas Pangritz, contemporary Jewish reaction to Luther und the Wittenberg Reformation, in: *Begegnungen (Encounters)* 1/2011

The Golden Calf

Leaflet from the first half of the 16th century: Josel von Rosheim (from 1478 until March 1554), an unofficial leader and speaker for Judaism in the German Realm, who strived on behalf of Jewish interests and against anti-Jewish intolerance, for instance, by pointing out that Jews, as all human beings, have been created in the image of God. Josel (von Rosheim in Alsace), also called Gössel and Gossel on the leaflet, wears the customary Jewish hood of that time, the Jewish ring on the left shoulder, a money bag and, in the right, a book (which in the column on the left is identified as a Talmud) with fictional mock Hebrew.

These attributes are meant to be polemical- disparaging, as well as his apparently devotional upward gaze toward the Golden Calf (Exodus 32); since the time of the Church Fathers the Golden Calf appears regularly in the index of alleged Jewish sins, for which reason they were regarded as rejected. Above all, the anti-Jewish accusation of greed is derived in the modern era from the worship of the Golden Calf.

Heinz Schreckenber, *Die Juden in der Kunst Europas (The Jews in the Art of Europe)*, Freiburg 1996

7. "The Jews are our doom" – Luther 1543

The Jews are so thoroughly desperate, evil, poisonous and devilish, that they have been our plague, pestilence and doom for 1400 years and up to the present. To sum up: they are devils to us. If I could, I would strike them down in my wrath, piercing them with the sword. Yes, indeed, they hold us as prisoners in our own country. They let us work for them with sweating noses, gaining money and goods for them while they sit behind ovens, being lazy, belching, baking pears, eating and drinking ravenously, living in comfort from the goods we earned, holding us and our possessions captive by means of their damned usury, ridiculing us and spitting on us, because we work and they live like idle princes...so they are our lords, we are their servants.

For this reason they have often been accused in history books of poisoning wells, stealing and stabbing children, for example in Trent and Weissensee They claim that they do not do these things. Whether this is true or not, I know that they are totally willing to do these things, secretly or openly.

Concerning the Jews and their Lies, 1543

In: W. Kampmann, Deutsche und Juden (Germans and Jews), p. 46

Ritual Murder

A two-year old Christian child, Simon (who for an extended time was revered as a Christian martyr on March 24), son of a tanner in Trent, disappeared on March 23 (Maundy Thursday), 1475. In the night between Easter Sunday and Easter Monday his mutilated body was discovered by Jews in a water canal which ran by a Jewish house. Although they immediately reported the find to the local bishop, they became suspects. The Jews who were allegedly involved with the murder, Samuel, Angelus, Tobias (a doctor), Israel and Bonaventura, as well as a Jew named Joaff (Joff), were immediately arrested. A baptized Jew, Johann of Feltre, who at this time was imprisoned because of theft, when asked about Jewish Passover rituals, asserted that the Jews used the blood of Christian children in the preparation of unleavened bread and mixed it with Passover wine, cursing Christ and Christianity. 10 more Jews were arrested (...) and altogether 14 Jews were executed, after they had made pertinent admission of guilt while being interrogated under torture.

Heinz Schreckenberg, Die Juden in der Kunst Europas (The Jews in the Art of Europe), Freiburg 1996

8 Church Procedures long before Luther

Marriage and sexual relations between Christians and Jews are prohibited

(Synod of Elvira, 306)

Jews and Christians are not allowed to eat together

(Synod of Elvira, 306)

Jews are not allowed to be public officials

(Synod of Clermont, 535)

Jews are not allowed to have Christian servants, maids or slaves

(3rd Synod of Orleans, 538)

Jews are not allowed to show themselves on the streets during Holy Week

(3rd Synod of Orleans, 538)

Burning of the Talmud and other Jewish Writings

(12th Synod of Toledo, 681)

Christians are not allowed to consult Jewish doctors

(Trullanic Synod, 692)

Christians are not allowed to live together with Jews

(Synod of Narbonne, 1050)

Jews, like Christians, are required to pay the church tithe (10% of income)

(Synod of Gerona, 1078)

Prohibition of work on Sunday

(Synod of Szabolcs, 1092)

Jews are not allowed to indict Christians or act as witnesses against them

(3rd Lateran Council, 1179, Canon 26)

Jews are prohibited from disinheriting a brother in faith who converts to Christianity

(3rd Lateran Council, 1179)

9 Church Procedures long before Luther

Jews must wear a distinguishing sign on their clothing

(4th Lateran Council, 1215)

Building synagogues is prohibited

(Council of Oxford, 1222)

Christians are not allowed to participate in Jewish celebrations

(Synod of Vienna, 1267)

Jews are not allowed to dispute with simple people about the Catholic faith

(Synod of Vienna, 1267)

Jews may reside only in Jewish sectors

(Synod of Breslau, 1267)

Christians are not allowed to sell or lease land property to Jews

(Synod of Ofen, 1279)

Conversion of a Christian to Judaism or the return of a Jew to his former religion is to be regarded as a known heresy

(Synod of Mainz, 1310)

Selling or pawning church articles to Jews is prohibited

(Synod of Lavaur, 1368)

Jews may not serve as negotiators in contracts between Christians, especially not as mediators of marriages

(Council of Basel, 1434, 19th session)

Jews may not achieve academic statuses

(Council of Basel, 1434, 19th session)

From: Hans Küng, Das Judentum (Judaism), p. 293f.

10 After-Effects

“Dr. Martin Luther would be sitting today in my place on the bench of the accused if the representative of the prosecution were to take this book into account. In the book ‘Concerning the Jews and their Lies’, Dr. Martin Luther writes that the Jews are a horde of snakes, their synagogues should be burned down and they should be annihilated.”

NS-Gauleiter (political head of a district in Nazi Germany) and publisher of the Nazi propaganda newspaper “Der Stürmer” (The Attacker), Julius Streicher, 1946, addressing the international military tribunal in Nürnberg)

“And in the same way (as in the fight against Rome), it became obvious to him (Luther) that the Jews were among the worst enemies of the German people. No one, before or after him, fought against the Jews, these “embodiments of devils”, with such rudimentary force as he did, especially in his treatise “Concerning the Jews and their Lies” (1543). ‘A Jewish heart is so rigidly hardened, so rock-like hardened, so iron-like hardened, so devilishly hardened, that it cannot be moved in any way’. Luther, through his bitter war against Rome and Judah, was unconsciously - and nonetheless powerfully effective – one of the greatest protagonists for the preservation of the purity of our race.”

History book for higher schools, 7th class, 1941 (quoted by Kaufmann, p. 144)

“On November 10, 1938, Luther’s birthday, synagogues are burning in Germany...In this hour the voice must be heard of the man, who, as a German prophet in the 16th century, although starting out as a friend of the Jews when he did not know better, was driven by his conscience and his experiences of reality to become the greatest Anti-Semite of his time, the warning voice of his people regarding the Jews.”

The Bishop of the Church of the State of Thuringia, Martin Sasse (who belonged to the so-called German Christians) (quoted by Thomas Kaufmann, source as above, p. 143)

“The signers of this declaration, German Protestant Churches of the various states as well as church leaders, as members of the German Community stand at the front of this historic defensive warfare, recognizing its necessity, as indicated by, among others, the national police injunction regarding the identification of Jews as natural enemies of the Reich and the world, and already recognized by Dr. Martin Luther, who after bitter experiences called for severest actions against the Jews and their expulsion from German nations.”

Declaration of the Churches of the states of Saxony, Hesse-Nassau, Mecklenburg, Schleswig-Holstein, Anhalt, Thuringia and Lübeck at the introduction of the so-called “Jewish Star” in September 1941 (quoted by Thomas Kaufmann, source as above, p. 143, according the Ehrlich “Luther und die Juden (Luther and the Jews)”

11 Ascent from forecourt to the true church

„Ascension to the fore-courts of the revealed church“ refers to the temple in Jerusalem, which had several fore-courts, leading upwards from lower regions with ever higher steps to the Holy of Holies.

Luther’s interpretation of Psalm 122 makes his standpoint clear that the church has attained superiority over the synagogue, which accords with an assessment of the relationship between church and synagogue that existed long before Luther: on the one side, pride and triumph, on the other side, blindness, a broken staff and descendent tables of law.

Psalm 122

A prayer of blessing for Jerusalem
From David, a pilgrim song.

1 I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”
2 Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!
3 Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together,
4 to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
5 There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.
6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! “May they be secure who love you!
7 Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!”
8 For my brothers and companions' sake I will say, “Peace be within you!”
9 For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

(Translation: English Standard Version)

Luther, regarding Psalm 122:

These Psalms are referred to as “stair step songs“, because it is apparent that all of them talk about the ascent of the believing people of the synagogue into the church of Christ by means of a wonderful yearning.

Our feet did not yet stand, as we entered, nor did we sit in her, but awaited her (the church), as mentioned, "they (the feet) moved toward her": in your forecourts, Jerusalem, the synagogue, because the synagogue has been the forecourt of the church, but not yet the revealed church of Christ.

Jerusalem, o Church, which I call Jerusalem, built by Christ, a spiritual edifice, a congregation, meaning that it is of God, whose involvement produces a community of all that is good, unified within itself, since there is one faith, one hope, etc.

To this place, namely, to citizenship in the church, they ascend upwards from the synagogue.

Psalter of Wolfenbüttel (translation from Latin)

12 What remains to be done?

"We speak (...) about Christianity and Israel, and we speak about them in terms of daughter and mother, and that means that we do not speak about them as is done at a prominent place, at the West Portal of the Strasbourg Minster, at which a word is spoken in stone: of the Ecclesia, who elevates her head, the triumphant church, and of the synagogue, who lowers her head, with the eyes blindfolded; the staff in her hand is broken; but we can no longer speak in this way (...) Regarding Christianity and Israel, we must admit: since the November days of the year 1938, on which the synagogues burned, and on which we did not recognize or assume our place on the side of the hunted, we bear a guilt in relation to our mother."

Pastor Albrecht Goes, in his sermon "Watcher of Israel", 1961 (quoted by Sibylle Biermann-Rau, "On Luther's birthday the synagogues burned". A question, Calwer Stuttgart 2012, p. 246f)

"We Lutherans derive our name from Martin Luther (...) But we can neither condone nor excuse the furious anti-Jewish writings of the Reformer (...) We acknowledge with deep regret that Luther's name was used at the time of National Socialism to justify Anti-Semitism and that his writings were suitable for such misuse."

Commission of the Lutheran World Federation to representatives of Judaism in Stockholm 1983 (quoted by Sibylle Biermann-Rau, as above, p. 30f.)

"False interpretation of Biblical texts led to a rejection and a devaluation of Judaism. Consequently, a categorical animosity toward Jews became part of Christian self-understanding. This inexcusable theological error had horrifying consequences.

The Evangelische Landeskirche in Württemberg has a two-fold involvement in this guilt, being a Lutheran church which stands in the tradition of Martin Luther. For this reason, we explicitly dissociate ourselves from his anti-Jewish assertions."

Synod of the Evangelische Württembergische Landeskirche in the year 2000 (quoted by Sibylle Biermann-Rau, as above, p. 308)

"The Nazis and their supporters could refer to a long and plenteous tradition of Christian anti-Jewish hostility. Most Church Fathers, many theologians of the Middle Ages, above all, Martin Luther, expressed their hate of the Jews openly, preaching against them without inhibitions."

Community of Christian Churches, Baden-Württemberg on November 8, 2008 (quoted by Sibylle Biermann-Rau, as above, p. 305)

“I wish to take a careful look at a dark side of the Reformation tradition. Luther’s stance toward Judaism necessitates a critical reflection. “

Former Bishop Margot Käßmann, on the day of her election as President of the Evangelische Kirche (Protestant Church) of Germany in October 2009 (quoted by Sibylle Biermann-Rau, as above, p. 309).

Has your church already issued a public and official rejection of Martin Luther’s Anti-Judaism?