

# The Centrality of a Charge of Blasphemy to Martin Luther's Later *Judenschriften*: An Exploration of Luther's Anti-Semitic Writings

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*While Martin Luther is almost universally recognized, many are unfamiliar with his anti-Semitic works. His writings from early in his career tended to be conciliatory toward Jewish people, but later in his life, he published several treatises that called for extremely brutal treatment. Much of the scholarship on this subject has focused on explaining the dramatic shift in Luther's thought, but it has done so largely without defining the actual nature of his conceptions of Jewish people. This paper proposes that at the root of Luther's later conceptions about Jewish people was a belief that they were blaspheming against God, and that his recommended persecution, while heinous, proceeded from this belief.*

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When Martin Luther published his treatise, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," in 1523, he seemed to be ushering in a new era of toleration and effort toward inter-religious understanding. One of the tragedies of the Reformation is that Luther published a flurry of intensely anti-Semitic treatises twenty years later, namely "On the Jews and their Lies," "On the Ineffable Name," and "The Last Words of David," which contain some of the harshest anti-Semitic invective written by any of the religious figures of the era.<sup>1</sup> These works and his other writings about the Jewish people, or *Judenschriften*, detract from Luther's positive contributions to religious thought. Moreover, though he could not have foretold the significance they would have for certain perpetrators of the Holocaust, their later use as justification for atrocities and the obvious similarity between his rhetoric and that of the persecution of Jews during the National Socialist period still raise alarm among readers of Luther's works and taint the study of his works today.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the studies that focus on Luther's writings on the Jewish people seek to understand why his tone shifted so substantially between his single treatise of 1523

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies, 1543," *The Christian in Society IV*, trans. Martin H. Bertram, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, et al in *Luther's Works, Vol 47*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1986), Hereafter abbreviated as "LW," 121-306; Martin Luther, "Vom Schem Hamphoras," in *The Jew in Christian Theology*, ed. Gerhard Falk (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 1992); Martin Luther, "On the Last Words of David," *Notes on Ecclesiastes, etc.*, in *LW, Vol. 15*, 265-352.

<sup>2</sup>A commonly referenced link to the Nazi period is Julius Streicher, the publisher of the National Socialist newspaper *Der Stürmer*. As noted in, for example, Eric Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism: Against His Better Judgement* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 115, Streicher often referenced Luther's *Judenschriften*. While on trial at Nuremberg, Streicher claimed that if the prosecution considered these writings, Luther would be on trial instead of him. Many scholars of Luther's writings including Gritsch and David M. Whitford's, *Luther: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark International, 2011), 166-168, examine the links to National Socialism.

and his triptych treatises of 1543. Study of the actual nature of his writings and how it changed is secondary to these studies' purpose and so receives less scrutiny than it perhaps should.<sup>3</sup> Without a precise understanding of the nature of Luther's thoughts about Jews and about how these thoughts evolved, the study of why they changed would be incomplete. Even among studies which primarily examine the nature of Luther's Jewish writings, scholars are far from reaching consensus. This paper will analyze Luther's major *Judenschriften* to evaluate how his conception of Jews changed and will add to the foundational body of research upon which others can utilize to explore the context of Luther's change in tone.

Given that Luther is a defining figure of his own era and of the whole early modern period, and given that his writings have been associated with the racist ideology of the twentieth century, a full understanding of his thoughts in this area will hopefully help the reader to appreciate Luther's contributions to Protestant thoughts about the Jewish people and to the broader European discussion of Jews and Judaism.<sup>4</sup> In the following sections, this paper will explore Luther's later beliefs about Jews as expressed in his three treatises of 1543 and argue that his points of contention with Jews were derived from their perceived blasphemy. This paper will briefly examine Luther's early writings about the Jewish people and argue that there was indeed a fundamental shift in his conceptions of Jews. It will show that Luther's prescriptions concerning Jews, treated at length in "On the Jews and Their Lies," can be understood as a logical practical consequence of his theological convictions about who the Jewish people were and their perceived role in history.

### ***A Charge of Blasphemy: The Roots of Luther's Later Anti-Semitism***

Luther did not write begin writing extensively on the subject of Jews until his late life. His 1523 treatise, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," adopted a conciliatory tone toward the Jewish people. It contained sections which recommended better treatment for Jews in order to facilitate conversion but was not primarily written for that purpose. After the Diet of Nuremberg in 1522, rumors flew that Luther had denied that Jesus' mother, Mary, was a virgin and instead believed Jesus was the natural son of Mary's husband Joseph, and that he was, therefore, a member of his familial line.<sup>5</sup> These rumors were just that – rumors; Luther had not been teaching this, and the people who could sway his major supporters were accusing him of these charges, so he wrote this treatise as a rebuttal to clear himself.<sup>6</sup> Luther had written the piece not to reconcile with the Jewish faith, but to decry the rumor that he had questioned Jesus' parentage. His next major *Judenschrift*, "Against the Sabbatarians," was written in the form of a letter to a friend and published it in 1538 in response to news (never verified) that Jews were winning Christian converts in Moravia.<sup>7</sup> In this work Luther sought to "fortify the Christians" against the proselytizing arguments of the Jews by outlining Scriptural rebuttals.<sup>8</sup> This work had a noticeably more negative outlook toward

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<sup>3</sup> One scholar who has studied the change in Luther's tone to the exclusion of the actual nature of his writings is David M. Whitford's, *Luther: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Others, including Thomas Kaufman, *Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), place far more prominence on the study of the evolution of Luther's thoughts than on determining the precise natures of his thoughts.

<sup>4</sup> David M. Whitford, *Luther: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 166-168.

<sup>5</sup> Walther I. Brandt, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," in *LW, Vol. 45*, 197.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, "Against the Sabbatarians" in *LW, Vol. 45*, 47, 65.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

Judaism than “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew” and contained the nascent forms of what became Luther’s major accusations against the Jewish faith and Jewish people. At the end of this text, Luther admitted that he had, “more thoughts on this subject than I have managed to express,” and five years later published in quick succession his three major *Judenschriften*, in which he gave the fullest expression of his conceptions of the Jews.<sup>9</sup> It is in these three later works and “Against the Sabbatarians” in which the most cohesive examples of Luther’s conceptions of the Jewish people are found.

Scholars’ conclusions about the nature of his beliefs often neglect certain important aspects when they seek to find a unified theory of “the Jew” in Luther’s writings, in part because they try to link his late belief system with the beliefs evident in his earlier writings. Some, like Dean Phillip Bell and David Nirenberg, seek to reduce the Jewish people of Luther’s writings to mere paper figures. Bell claims that Luther’s Jews were “largely theological and rhetorical in nature.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Nirenberg posits that Luther’s “‘Jewish Problem’ was the product of his theory of how biblical language... should be interpreted – in other words, of hermeneutics.”<sup>11</sup> This approach does not agree with the clearly articulated plans to persecute Jews which appear in “On the Jews and Their Lies.” If the Jews were mere rhetorical or hermeneutical figures, why put in the effort to oppose actual living Jews? Other scholars see a more practical approach in Luther’s thoughts about Jews. David M. Whitford writes of a “tendency to view Jews only in terms of their possible conversion to Christianity.”<sup>12</sup> Jews did not respond to Luther’s efforts to convert them in “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew,” and the scholars in Whitford’s camp, including Gerhard Falk, advocate that Luther’s later negative beliefs about the Jews arose because the mass conversions for which he hoped for never materialized.<sup>13</sup> This approach is also incomplete, as Luther demonized the Jewish people in ways that are too theologically symbolic to be directed against actual unconverted Jews. Wilhelm Maurer presents a more developed view when he argues that Luther’s recommendations on how Jews should be treated were so harsh because he believed he was fighting blasphemy.<sup>14</sup> This angle should be expanded. In fact, each of Luther’s major accusations against Judaism and Jewish people boiled down to a charge of blasphemy - it was the core of his conception of who the Jewish people were, expressed in his notorious later writings.

Luther’s attack on Jews was four-pronged. With some overlap between the various treatises of 1538 and 1543, he charged Jews with boasting in their blood lineage and circumcision, rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, seeking mastery over others through the power of the Devil, and willfully perverting God’s word in Scripture. Each of these charges was concentrated on accusing the Jews of exhibiting blasphemous tendencies.

The first charge was largely theological and symbolic. Luther accused Jews of boasting in their ancestry, claiming that because they were descended from the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 97

<sup>10</sup> Dean Phillip Bell, “Martin Luther and the Jews: Context and Content,” *Theology Today* 74, no. 3 (2017): 224.

<sup>11</sup> David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013), 256.

<sup>12</sup> David M. Whitford, *Luther: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 154.

<sup>13</sup> Gerhard Falk, *The Jew in Christian Theology* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 1992), 63.

<sup>14</sup> Wilhelm Maurer, “Die Zeit der Reformation,” in *Kirche und Synagoge*, ed. Karl-Heinrich Rengstorf and Siegfried von Kortzfleisch (1968), paraphrased in Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther’s Last Battles* (London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 138.

patriarchs, they were worthy of special regard from God.<sup>15</sup> Luther responded that their perceived argument for ethnic superiority was faulty because blood alone did not make them the people of God. Luther cited Deuteronomy, arguing that Moses had decreed that any uncircumcised male must be cut off from the people of Israel; therefore, according to Luther, blood meant nothing because “God will not be his God, unless he, over and above his birth, is also circumcised and accepted into the covenant of God.”<sup>16</sup> Even though God had made this clear in the Scripture, according to Luther, the Jewish people “give God the lie; they insist on being in the right, and... purpose to wrest God’s grace from him.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Luther claimed that Jews gloried in their circumcision without reason, as circumcision was insufficient to merit God’s grace. He believed that Moses told the Israelites to “circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart,” indicating that mere physical circumcision was “null and void, ... unless accompanied by something else.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, he pointed out that many of the Gentiles in the Old Testament converted without being subjected to the covenant of circumcision. Luther saw Jewish people’s perceived presumption of being God’s only people by merit of birth and circumcision, and not by the keeping of the law that came with circumcision or the acceptance of God’s grace, as a “mockery, which treats God as a fool,” and “blasphemous lying, contrary to all Scripture.”<sup>19</sup>

Luther’s second charge against the Jewish people was that they denied Jesus as the Messiah even after being presented with proof. There was likely a personal element to this issue – Luther’s reference in “Against the Sabbatarians” to Jews who, “even when one persuades them out of Scripture, ... retreat from Scripture to their rabbis.” His anger reflected his deeper resentment that his exegetical works and arguments in “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew” had not produced the conversions he desired. At the same time, his pointedly historical reasoning shows that this accusation was more theologically founded than a mere personal reaction.<sup>20</sup> Many scholars, such as Eric W. Gritsch, argue that Luther was primarily a proponent of the theory of succession: that because Jews were unfaithful in following Mosaic law, Christians had inherited their position as the people of God.<sup>21</sup> As Heiko Oberman phrased it, Luther believed that “ever since Christ’s appearance on earth, the Jews have had no more future as Jews.”<sup>22</sup> Luther certainly claimed such, arguing that the destruction of the temple 1460 years earlier was proof that the Jews were “surely rejected by God.”<sup>23</sup> However, this was not linked to a generic unfaithfulness, but to the specific sin of denying Jesus as the Messiah. In Luther’s mind, he and other Christian scholars had offered Jews incontrovertible proof of the Messiahship of Christ.

Despite claiming that the conversion of the Jewish people was impossible, the greater part of “On the Jews and Their Lies” is devoted to the exegesis of four Old Testament prophecies meant to point to Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Luther

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW, Vol. 47*, 143.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 153, 155.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, “Against the Sabbatarians,” in *LW, Vol. 47*, 66.

<sup>21</sup> Eric W. Gritsch, “The Jews in Reformation Theology,” in *Jewish-Christian Encounters over the Centuries: Symbiosis, Prejudice, Holocaust, Dialogue*, ed. Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1994), 199.

<sup>22</sup> Heiko Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 46.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW Vol. 47*, 139.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

sought to prove historically that the long exile of the Jews proved the Messiah had already come in the person of Jesus, continuing the Hebrew royal line of David in a spiritual capacity in “Against the Sabbatarians.” Unlike previous biblical exiles into captivity in Egypt and Babylon, the current “Roman captivity” had no prophesied time limit or location, no prophet or sign.<sup>25</sup> In the previous exiles, God was also “not prevented from keeping such an oath [to deliver them] even though the Jews with their sins deserved complete destruction.”<sup>26</sup> Since the Messiah and the survival of David’s throne had been promised in Scripture, and the sin of the Israelites could not prevent God from keeping his promises, “it follows incontestably that one of the following two things must be true: either the Messiah must have come fifteen hundred years ago, or God must have lied.”<sup>27</sup> Luther saw the Jewish people as “slandering God and deceiving themselves when they accuse God of breaking faith” because they persisted in believing the Messiah had not come.<sup>28</sup> According to Luther, Jews were continually blaspheming the character of God because to them, “God must ever be a liar.”<sup>29</sup>

Luther’s next accusation against the Jewish people painted them as so eager to dominate others that they sought power from mystical and demonic sources. In his opinion, Jews had rejected Jesus as the Messiah because he was not the ethno-national savior they were looking for, who would “subdue the Romans and all the world under himself with the sword, installing them [the Jews] as mighty princes over all the Gentiles.”<sup>30</sup> Not only did he argue that Jews “presume to instruct God and prescribe the manner in which he is to redeem them,” but they also wanted him to “kill and exterminate all of us Goyim [a derogatory term for Gentiles] ... so they can lay their hands on the land, the goods, and the government of the whole world.”<sup>31</sup> Associated with this accusation, Luther gave credence to all the worst medieval false allegations against the Jews, including well poisonings and the blood libel.<sup>32</sup> In a conspiratorial segment worthy of “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” Luther even described Jews as saying to one another, “We do not labor, and yet we enjoy prosperity and leisure... This makes us [the Gentiles’] masters and them our servants.”<sup>33</sup> He viewed them as a curse upon the Germans, “a heavy burden, a plague, a pestilence, a sheer misfortune,” brought in by the devil, who “devours what is ours through his saints, the Jews.”<sup>34</sup>

“On the Jews and Their Lies” treated the supposed desire of Jews for domination of the Gentiles at length, and associates Jews with the Devil. The strongest demonic associations were contained in the second treatise of 1543, “Vom Schem Hamphoras,” or “On the Ineffable Name,” referring to the secret and powerful name of God. According to Luther, the Jewish people alleged that Jesus had gained his miraculous powers by learning this name, and the Jews, especially the rabbis, also sought power by holding this name as especially holy.<sup>35</sup> Using strained numerological

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther, “Against the Sabbatarians,” in *LW Vol. 47*, 69, 76.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW Vol. 47*, 232.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW Vol. 47*, 217. The blood libel refers to a common accusation that the Jews participated in the ritual murder of Christian children, noted in Franklin Sherman, “Introduction to ‘On the Jews and Their Lies,’” in *LW Vol. 47*, 131.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 264-266.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther, “Vom Schem Hamphoras,” in *The Jew in Christian Theology*, ed. Gerhard Falk (1992), 173, 175.

calculations, Luther argued that Jews had linked this name to the power of seventy-two angels (who Luther considered devils), and thus, according to Luther, set themselves up as incontrovertibly wise.<sup>36</sup> However Luther believed that the Devil had possessed the Jewish people and instead of receiving the holy power of the Schem Hamphoras, they had received the Sham Haperes, or the filth that comes from the intestines of a pig.<sup>37</sup> Luther saw Jews as making “God himself into a devil, in fact a servant of all devils” by conflating the name of God with a power which he saw as coming from demons, the ultimate form of blasphemy.<sup>38</sup>

Luther’s final accusation against the Jewish people and Judaism was one with which he was concerned for most of his career: the false interpretation of Scripture. It was not a stretch for David Nirenberg to argue that Luther’s conceptions of Jews were primarily hermeneutic; discussions of scriptural interpretation appear in each of his major *Judenschriften*.<sup>39</sup> Before Luther, the accepted view of scriptural interpretation in the Catholic Church was that Scripture had four senses, or meanings: historical, allegorical (theological), moral (personally instructive), and anagogical (“metaphysical and eschatological”), but Luther had his own system.<sup>40</sup> Instead of four senses, he had two: the literal or historical sense, and the spiritual or allegorical sense. This duality defined his exegesis of Scripture, as in Luther’s belief that “the literal or historical meaning of a passage is identified with the killing ‘letter,’ while the layers of allegorical meaning are associated with the saving ‘spirit’.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, viewing Scripture in its context as a Jewish historical text or Jewish literature was to yield to the killing letter. The only way to interpret it properly was to look at it as the literal story of Jesus Christ. According to Luther, this made Jewish interpretation unnecessary, and even outright false. “Since the Jews repudiate this Christ,” he wrote in “On the Last Words of David”, “they cannot know or understand what [the Scriptures] are saying. . . . He [the Jew] is ignorant of their significance.”<sup>42</sup> Luther did not stop there.

Arnold Ages categorizes Luther’s judgment of Jewish and especially Jewish rabbis’ interpretations into three main issues.<sup>43</sup> Luther felt that they misinterpreted Old Testament texts because they were more concerned with grammar than the spirit of the text, that they engaged in superficial exegesis because they did not have supernatural guidance to interpret Scripture, and that they intentionally misinterpreted Scripture to mislead Christians.<sup>44</sup> Luther’s three later treatises clearly supported these views. He complained that “the Jews babble” to make Scripture “agree with their stippled, tormented, and coerced grammar.”<sup>45</sup> He also alleged disturbingly that “the Jewish interpretation is not more than Jew-piss and Jew-sweat,” devoid of any actual value or substance.<sup>46</sup> This scatological language is not unique to his polemics against the Jews, but he certainly did not hold back when expressing his thoughts on the nature of Jewish scriptural interpretation. He totally rejected the value of rabbinical exegesis,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>39</sup> David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, 256.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Last Words of David,” in *LW Vol. 15*, 269.

<sup>43</sup> Arnold Ages, “Luther and the Rabbis,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 58, no. 1 (1967): 63-68.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Last Words of David,” in *LW Vol. 15*, 299.

<sup>46</sup> Martin Luther, “Vom Schem Hamphoras,” in *The Jew in Christian Theology* ed. Gerhard Falk (1992), 215.

claiming that in Jewish treatment of Scripture “they test it, twist it, interpret and distort almost every word.”<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Luther was convinced that this misinterpretation was intentional. He argued that the Jewish people perverted Scripture because “they cannot endure that we Gentiles should be their equal before God,” and, “they cannot tolerate the truth that God became incarnate.”<sup>48</sup> Their misinterpretations were not based on a lack of understanding or on misinformation, he believed. Rather, Luther believed Jews were “maliciously and willfully denying and blaspheming the recognized truth in violation of their conscience.”<sup>49</sup>

In an analysis of Luther’s writings on “the Jews,” blasphemy stands out as the common thread that runs through all the charges that he brings against them. Neither Bell and Nirenberg’s assertions – that the Jews of Luther’s writings were meant to be understood rhetorically or that his main quarrel with the Jews was over differing Scriptural interpretations (nor Whitford and Falk’s myopic belief that the change in the nature of Luther’s *Judenschriften* was due primarily to disappointed hopes of mass Jewish conversion) fits the evidence. None of these other classifications correspond with all of Luther’s major accusations. He certainly did position Jews symbolically, especially when critiquing their reliance on blood and circumcision and their dependence on the killing letter of Scripture, but this does not explain his claims that Jews wanted to rule the world with demonic power or his recommendations that Jewish people be prevented from practicing their religion. Luther also placed great weight on the hermeneutic nature of his conflict with the Jews, becoming intensely focused on scriptural exegesis. But this interpretation of his beliefs also falls short in explaining his claims of practical Jewish threats and his critique of their boasting. The argument that Luther’s later vitriol against those of Jewish faith was based on the refusal of real Jews to convert is also problematic, as it does not explain why he was concerned on such a theological level with their scriptural interpretations. The centrality of blasphemy explains why each of these four charges was so distasteful to Luther, and why the program he set out to oppose the Jews was so harsh. The condemnation of blasphemy is what holds Luther’s later anti-Semitic writings together. Therefore, analyzing the charges of blasphemy is the best way to analyze these later writings in a cohesive manner.

### ***Tolerance to Sharp Mercy: The Transformation of Luther’s Conceptions of the Jews***

There is disagreement among scholars about whether the fundamental nature of Luther’s beliefs on Jewish people changed over his lifetime. The traditional view, articulated by Reinhold Lewin, is that the milder conceptions of “the Jews” which Luther held in 1523 when he published “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew” were driven largely by hopes for mass conversions of Jews to Christianity, and that once it was apparent that no such conversions were forthcoming, his thinking toward them became hostile.<sup>50</sup> Another view, most strongly promoted by Wilhelm Maurer, postulates that Luther’s essential theology about Jews and Judaism did not evolve, rather that the practical consequences just became more violent over the course of his

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<sup>47</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW Vol. 47*, 210.

<sup>48</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW Vol. 47*, 215; “On the Last Words of David,” in *LW 15*, 321.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW Vol. 47*, 184.

<sup>50</sup> Reinhold Lewin, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden* (Aalen: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1911, reprinted 1973), paraphrased in Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther’s Last Battles* (London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 137.

career.<sup>51</sup> Proponents of this view often draw from Luther's earlier works to prove that he demeaned Jews in his writings even before his seemingly conciliatory treatise. They often turn to Luther's lectures on the Psalms, given between 1513 and 1515 for evidence, since, as David Nirenberg explains, "of the roughly one hundred Psalms to which he dedicated full commentaries, only two ... are free of polemics against the Jews." Even Reinhold Lewin conceded that the 1523 treatise was a high point between two periods of largely anti-Semitic sentiment, though he held that Luther's anti-Semitism was merely theological during the era of his Psalms lectures.<sup>52</sup>

Luther was never a supporter of the Jewish faith, and he certainly used Jews as symbolic foils in his biblical commentaries, but his early conceptions of the Jewish people were much more moderate than the hard-line stance based on blasphemy which he later adopted. The imagined Jews of Luther's early works were still misled by ungodly leaders, "training them to ungodliness," but he relativized their "blindness and ignorance" by accusing Christians of the same.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, the consideration he showed towards Jews whom he felt could convert was not relegated to "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," but appeared as well in his 1521 sermon on the Magnificat, the song of Jesus's mother Mary in the Gospel of Luke. Here Luther urged Christians to "tell them [the Jews] the truth in all kindness; if they will not receive it, let them go."<sup>54</sup> His milder position in "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew" may have represented his early views as more pro-Semitic than they were, but his relative understanding and toleration were not isolated to this treatise alone.

"That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew" gave the fullest explanation of Luther's early beliefs about Jews and offered a markedly different approach than his 1543 treatises. In 1523, he seemed to consider the non-conversion of Jewish people reasonable, writing that "if I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian."<sup>55</sup> In each of the areas that he would later accuse Jewish people of blasphemy, he offered understanding in this treatise. Luther would later rail against perceived Jewish ethnic pride and treat it as a presumption against God but here he claimed that "no nation among the Gentiles has he granted so high an honor as he has to the Jews."<sup>56</sup> He also referred to the Christians as "but Gentiles, while the Jews are of the lineage of Christ. We are aliens and in-laws; they are blood relatives of our Lord."<sup>57</sup> He would also later criticize their stubborn refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah, but here, he suggested that the burden lay with the Christians: "Because the Jews do not accept the evangelists, we must confront them with other evidence."<sup>58</sup> Additionally, his admission that "the Gentiles have always shown greater hostility toward the Jews than toward any other nation," is a far cry from his later accusations that the Jews sought to dominate the world with supernatural power, and the urgency of his defense against Jewish interpretations of Scripture that is so prevalent in his later writings is almost nonexistent in his earlier work.<sup>59</sup> He did seek to "win some Jews to the Christian faith" by convincing them with Scripture, but relating to an

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<sup>51</sup> David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, 254.

<sup>52</sup> Reinhold Lewin, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden*, 137.

<sup>53</sup> Martin Luther, "Lecture on Psalm 109," in *LW Vol. 11*, 355; Martin Luther, "Lecture on Psalm 78," in *LW Vol. 11*, 51.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Luther, "The Magnificat," in *LW Vol. 21*, 355.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Luther, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," in *LW Vol. 45*, 200.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.



interpretational disagreement, he wrote that “among themselves their own conscience tells them this [interpretation] is so. Therefore, let them say what they please.”<sup>60</sup>

That Luther was so tolerant and understanding of Jews, by the standards of the time, in this treatise demonstrates that his fundamental conceptions concerning them had undergone an evolution by 1543. He may have exhibited anti-Semitic tendencies in some of his earlier exegetical works, but they did not share a theological basis with the detailed charges of blasphemy that he would later level against the whole Jewish people. Luther would not have proposed this relative tolerance towards Jews if he had believed they were blaspheming God; his later convictions about Jews led to a radically different approach to dealing with them.

### ***A Logical Effect: Luther's Recommendations for Treatment of the Jews***

Because Luther's essential beliefs about Jews changed after 1523 to become primarily focused on Jewish blasphemy against God, his recommendations regarding Jews changed as well. When he saw Jews as misguided, he could afford to counsel Christians to be understanding with them, allow them to convert by degrees and “first recognize Jesus as Messiah, then as God.”<sup>61</sup> Once his theology evolved into the belief that the Jews were defiantly blaspheming against God, allowing them to continue was tantamount to participating in their sin. Luther believed that “since they live among us, we dare not tolerate their conduct... if we do, we become sharers in their lies, cursing, and blasphemy.”<sup>62</sup>

Thomas Kaufmann argues that in 1543, in a time of personal difficulty and tragedy after the death of his daughter and during a period of declining health, Luther felt that he had “failed on a personal level” in relating to Jews and that because he had promoted tolerance, he was guilty on some level of contributing to their blasphemy.<sup>63</sup> Whether or not this conviction held a personal element, by 1543 Luther certainly believed that in order to avoid collective guilt for allowing Jews to curse God in their midst, Christians had to implement a program of opposition against the Jewish people, and he encouraged the governing authorities to take up primary responsibility.<sup>64</sup> Luther advocated a course of what he called “sharp mercy” as distinguished from “gentle mercy”, which would “only tend to make them worse and worse.”<sup>65</sup> This so-called “sharp mercy” is so inhumane as to strain credulity that the writer of “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew” and “On the Jews and Their Lies” was the same. The total shift in treatment is plausible as it was the result of a growing conviction that the Jews were blaspheming God, and each of Luther's major instructions regarding the Jews corresponds to one of his charges of blasphemy.

Luther first urged Christian rulers to burn the Jews' synagogues, religious schools, and houses to the ground and to bury the ruins “so that God might see that we ... do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son.”<sup>66</sup> He justified this by citing Mosaic Law. In Deuteronomy, Moses had commanded the Israelites to deal with cities that engaged in idolatry by

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 200, 209.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>62</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW Vol. 47*, 268.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Kaufman, *Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 124.

<sup>64</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW Vol. 47*, 272, 275.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 268, 272.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 268.

totally burning them to give them over to the Lord. Luther wrote that if Moses were still alive, “he would be the first to set fire to the synagogues and houses of the Jews.”<sup>67</sup>

Second, he recommended that the rabbis be forbidden to teach, and all the Jews’ sacred books be confiscated.<sup>68</sup> Later in the treatise, Luther urged rulers to forbid Jews access to the Bible since he believed they used it and other religious books “to blaspheme the Son of God... and they will never use them differently.”<sup>69</sup> He extended these efforts in “Vom Schem Hamphoras” and “On the Last Words of David,” urging Christian scholars to “cleanse the holy old Bible of the filth and piss of Judas” and to “wrest the Old Testament from the rabbis wherever possible,” freeing “the whole Hebrew Bible... from their [the Jews’] shameful and blasphemous commentaries.”<sup>70</sup>

Luther gave his list of instructions twice in “On the Jews and Their Lies”. Both instances begin with similar sentiments, but then provide distinct instructions for social oppression and religious oppression respectively. The first list continues with direction to abolish safe-conduct on the highways for Jews, prohibit usury and confiscate all money held by Jews, and compel young Jews into forced labor. These measures were meant to end Jews’ perceived abuses against Gentiles and ensure that they could not “idle away their time behind the stove, feasting and farting, and on top of all, boasting blasphemously of their lordship over the Christians.”<sup>71</sup> He meant to curb what he saw as the Jews’ desire for mastery, which led them to turn to demonic power. The second list enunciated religious restrictions. Luther wanted to forbid Jews “on pain of death to praise God... in our country” and “to utter the name of God within our hearing.”<sup>72</sup> This was to prevent Jews from blaspheming God in the Christians’ midst and thus making Christians guilty as well, for “God’s honor and the salvation of us all, including that of the Jews, are at stake!”<sup>73</sup>

Disappointment over non-conversion cannot explain the extent of Luther’s vitriol and desired persecution. Luther believed that nothing less than Christians’ salvation was at stake if the alleged blasphemy against God by the Jews was allowed to continue in their midst. Therefore, mercy was not an option. Those who wanted to help the Jews or treat them kindly were told to “boast that he has strengthened the devil and his brood for further blaspheming our dear Lord... for which Christ will reward him on the day of judgment, together with the Jews – in the eternal fire of hell!”<sup>74</sup> Luther clearly believed that the hard line he was advocating toward the Jews was the only one which was in accordance with his beliefs about them.

### ***Conclusion***

As shown, Luther’s negative conceptions of Jews in his later life were completely different from the diplomatic efforts of his early works. The change of tone in Luther’s *Judenschriften* is too radical to simply be explained by the disappointment of his hopes for conversion. His three treatises of 1543, and to some extent “Against the Sabbatarians”, level a plethora of charges against Jews, but the common element is the accusation of blasphemy. Thus, sometime between 1523 and

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>70</sup> Martin Luther, “Vom Schem Hamphoras,” in *The Jew in Christian Theology*, ed. Gerhard Falk (1992), 222.; “On the Last Words of David,” in *LW Vol. 15*, 343, 329.

<sup>71</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW Vol. 47*, 270-272.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 278.

1543, Luther came to the conviction that this blasphemy was at the root of the Jewish problem. Further research will be needed to determine how and why that conviction was formed, but by acknowledging that Luther's thinking about Jews fundamentally changed during this period to focus on the issue of blasphemy, scholars can research Luther's developing beliefs about Jewish people more effectively. Additionally, clarifying the nature of Luther's conceptions of Jews, which were grounded on a different basis than those of the twentieth-century racists to whom Luther's later *Judenschriften* held significance, will help return Luther to his proper context and allow researchers to examine the actual effects of his writings on the Protestant thoughts about Jews in the Early Modern period. Finally, that Luther's attitudes toward and instructions concerning Jews were so violent should come as no surprise if blasphemy was at the root of his objections to them. He believed that to do anything less than persecute them was to incur the wrath of God. His proposed regimen of persecution was, therefore, a logical extension of his later beliefs about the Jews. This does not excuse Luther from his abhorrent positions, but it sheds light on this dark side of the reformer's thought, and it fleshes out the portrait of the historical Luther as one whose practical ideas varied widely as his theology evolved.

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