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ARCHIVES

Luther's Alleged Anti-Semitism

By CARL S. MEYER

A RECENT best-seller dredges up the old charges that Luther was violently opposed to the Jews, that he was a "savage anti-Semite,"¹ and with that, a "ferocious believer in absolute obedience to political authority."² According to this writer, William Shirer, Luther's words and sentiments gave the rulers of Nazi Germany, Hitler, Goering, Himmler, words and a pattern of conduct to follow in their program against the Jews.³

What are the facts in the case? Specifically, what was Luther's attitude toward the Jews?

The question is not a new one nor has it lacked answers. In the year in which Hitler came to power Erich Vogelsang in Germany wrote a scholarly analysis of the question.⁴ Roland H. Bainton's best-selling and reliable biography of Luther comes

to grips with the problem,⁵ and from Heidelberg University a front-ranking Luther student gives an authoritative answer to the question.⁶

Luther's main writings against the Jews are *Wider die Sabbather* (1537),⁷ *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen* (1543),⁸ and *Vom Schem Hamphoras und vom Geschlecht Christi* (1543).⁹

"For Luther the Jewish question is first and last the Christ question," Vogelsang affirms.¹⁰ Bainton, too, points this out.¹¹ "To him the Jewish question was the reversal of the Christ question," Bornkamm says and shows that Luther was concerned with the suppression of Jewish synagog services and not of the Jewish race.¹² Already in 1523 Luther had written *Dass Jesus Christus ein geborner Jude sei*.¹³ In it he makes a missionary appeal, hopeful that at least some of the Jews will heed the Gospel and come to faith in Christ.

¹ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), p. 91: "But it may be said, in passing, that this towering but erratic genius [Martin Luther], this savage anti-Semite and hater of Rome, who combined in his tempestuous character so many of the best and worst qualities of the German — the coarseness, the boisterousness, the fanaticism, the intolerance, the violence, but also the honesty, the simplicity, the self-scrutiny, the passion for learning and for music and for poetry and for righteousness in the eyes of God — left a mark on the life of the Germans, for both good and bad, more indelible, more fateful, than was wrought by any other single individual before or since."

² *Ibid.*, p. 236.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Erich Vogelsang, *Luthers Kampf gegen die Juden*, Sammlung gemeinverständlicher Vorträge und Schriften aus dem Gebiet der Theologie und Religionsgeschichte, Nr. 168 (Tübingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1933).

⁵ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), pp. 379, 380.

⁶ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, trans. Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), pp. 31 f., 226—233. See also Arnas K. E. Holmio, *The Lutheran Reformation and the Jews* (Hancock, Mich.: Finnish Lutheran Book Concern, c. 1949).

⁷ WA, L, 309, 337; St. L., XX, 1829—1861.

⁸ WA, LIII, 412—552; St. L., XX, 1861 to 2029.

⁹ WA, LIII, 573—648; St. L., XX, 2029 to 2109.

¹⁰ Vogelsang, p. 9.

¹¹ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 255.

¹² Bornkamm, p. 31.

¹³ WA, XI, 307—336; St. L., XX, 1793 to 1821.

Under the papacy the Jews had little reason to become converted to Christianity, Luther believed. "If I were a Jew, I would suffer the rack ten times before I would go over to the pope," he said.¹⁴ Luther probably did not know Boccaccio's story of the Jew who went to Rome and there was converted to Roman Catholicism, because, as he said, if this church was able to exist in such a corrupted state it must be the true religion.

Luther advocated that the Jews be permitted to work and live among the Germans.

If one wants to be of help to them, one must not use the law of the papacy but of Christian love on them, accept them amicably, permit them to ply their trades and work with us, so that they may hear and see our Christian doctrine and life. And if some of them are stiff-necked, what of it? After all, we are not all good Christians either.¹⁵

During the Middle Ages the Jews had been subjected to the Inquisition in Spain and then expelled (1492). The expulsion of the Jews from England (1290) and from France (1306) may not have been known to Luther. In 1525 they were excluded from Naples. In 1547, the year after Luther's death, stringent laws were made against them in Rome, confining them to the Ghetto. These references do not tell about the pogroms, persecutions, sumptuary laws, and repressive measures against the Jews during the Middle Ages.

Luther reacted unfavorably to such treatment of the Jews. His harsh words

against them were not for economic, social, or political, but for theological reasons.

Luther did not advocate religious toleration in the sense in which a Sebastian Castellio or Roger Williams did.¹⁶ However, in the controversy between Johann Reuchlin and the Cologne scholars Luther sided with Reuchlin, who opposed the burning of Jewish books. "Martin [Luther] declares that we have God's word for it that the Jews are bound to abuse and blaspheme Christ and if we take away what they have written they will simply write the worse."¹⁷

". . . the Jews are bound to abuse and blaspheme Christ," this is the key to an understanding of Luther's expressions against the Jews. "Whoever denies, blasphemes, curses Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of the Virgin Mary, denies, blasphemes, curses God the Father Himself, who created the heavens and the earth. This is what the Jews do."¹⁸

Now since Turks and Jews hate Christ and persecute His Word, they certainly also hate the God who has created heaven and earth, do not believe in Him, and do not honor Him.¹⁹

¹⁶ Roland H. Bainton, *Travail of Religious Liberty*, Harper Torchbooks (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), has an excellent, very readable account of some of the main advocates of toleration.

¹⁷ Robert H. Fife, *The Revolt of Martin Luther* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), pp. 208 f., with reference to WAB, I, 23, Feb. (?) 1514.

¹⁸ WA, LIII, 531, quoted by Vogelsang, p. 11.

¹⁹ Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: An Anthology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), I, 159, No. 472; from WA, LII, 731; St. L., XIIIa, 1285.

¹⁴ WA, TR, 2912a, quoted by Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 379.

¹⁵ WA, XI, 336, quoted by Bornkamm, p. 227.

Again he wrote:

God the Father cannot tolerate anyone who wants to go to Him or approach Him unless he brings His beloved Son Christ with Him. . . . That is why Jews . . . who despise this Son of God with His suffering, death, and resurrection and propose to come to God in a different way, stand condemned.²⁰

The pride of the Jews in their race and origin, that they were "children of Abraham," was repulsive to Luther, because the Jews staked their hope of heaven on this fact. They pointed to the fact that they were circumcised and believed that this Old Testament rite of the covenant would avail them. They boasted that they had the Law and the Prophets.

What an incalculable effort they put forth in their search for salvation! But all this effort of theirs will prove to be futile and wasted. It is terrible that this great effort to find God with all their services of worship will be utterly wasted.²¹

They failed to recognize that Jesus was the Promised One of God as foretold in the Law and the Prophets. Luther said very pointedly: "Shame on the Jews for not wanting to tolerate the Son! This is why God has destroyed and rejected them."²² Luther found fault with the Jews because they attempted to keep the Law of Moses and did not rely on the promise of the coming Messiah.

The Law was given in order that by its light they [the Jews] might the better come to know their cursed state and the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 187, 188, No. 546; from WA, XX, 362; St. L., III, 753.

²¹ *Ibid.*, III, 1259, No. 4015; from WA, XXXV, 574; St. L., VIII, 177.

²² *Ibid.*, III, 1403, No. 4526; from WA, XXXVI, 183; St. L., XIIIb, 2092 f.

more fervently and heartily desire the promised Seed; in this they had an advantage over all the heathen world. But they turned this advantage into a disadvantage; they undertook to keep the Law by their own strength and failed to learn from it their needy and cursed state. Thus they shut the door upon themselves, so that the Seed was compelled to pass them by.²³

They had a false Messianic hope. Luther emphasized this point.

Then, too, as an interpreter of the Old Testament—he taught Old Testament exegesis at the University of Wittenberg—he had grave misgivings about rabbinical methods of exegesis. Their interpretations of the Mosaic Law, which Jesus already condemned in the sermon on the Mount, Luther, too, condemned.

He noted the dispersion of the Jews and saw the fearful consequences of the wrath of God in it.²⁴

For Luther there was a deep warning in the words of St. Paul: "Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not high minded, but fear" (Rom. 11:20). To Rom. 11:22 Luther writes:

The lesson of this passage is this: when we see the fall of the Jews or the heretics or others, we should not concentrate our attention on the person that fell but on the work that God performs in them, so that we may learn to fear God by the example of the misfortune of someone else and not entertain any presumptuous pride with respect to ourselves. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the apostle teaches us here that we give consideration to the

²³ *Ibid.*, II, 755, No. 2336; from WA, VII, 800; St. L., V, 1441.

²⁴ Vogelsang, pp. 12—18.

one who performs this work rather than that we make a comparison between others and ourselves.

In opposition to this, many display an amazing stupidity when they are so presumptuous as to call the Jews "dogs" or accursed or whatever they choose to name them, though they themselves do not know who or what sort they themselves are before God. They should feel compassion for them fearing that they themselves may have to take a similar punishment, but instead they rashly heap blasphemous insults upon them.²⁵

The Jews are a warning to the Christians by their very existence. Luther wrote that he did not wish to quarrel with the Jews, but he wanted to be certain that "we" (he says) do not fall under the wrath of God, but hear His Word and do not neglect the day of grace.²⁶

There is no greater wrath of God than His silence, such as that with which the Jews are now being treated. Against them the wrath of our Lord God is so severely inflamed that not one little word or one sign has come from Him in fifteen hundred years.²⁷

The story of the sufferings and tribulations of Jewish people for 15 centuries, therefore, is a warning and proof that they are in error in rejecting Christ as the Messiah,

since they did not have to suffer more than seventy years for far more manifest, horrible, and murderous sins, during which

²⁵ *Luther: Lectures on Romans*, trans. and ed. Wilhelm Pauck, *Library of Christian Classics*, xv (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), pp. 313, 314.

²⁶ WA, LIII, 522, quoted by Vogelsang, p. 20.

²⁷ *What Luther Says*, III, 1558, No. 5064, from WA, TR, V, No. 5553.

period of time they, furthermore, were not deserted by prophets and consolation, but now in their present misery not even a fly buzzes comfort to them with a single wing. If this does not mean that they are forsaken of God, then the devil may also boast that he is not yet forsaken by God.²⁸

Luther hoped for the conversion of individual Jews. There is no basis for the contention that Luther looked for the mass conversion of the Jews and that in his disappointment at the failure of such a happening he turned against the Jews. The statement that he looked for more individual conversions, however, seems to be in keeping with the facts.²⁹

Luther's attitude against the Jews was conditioned in part, too, by his point of view on usury. The Jews were among the chief moneylenders of that day, and that often at outrageous rates of interest. Small debtors particularly were often rendered helpless. The rise of capitalism made for some hardships in the agrarian economy of Wittenberg and Saxony. The state, Luther believed, ought to regulate the economic life for the common welfare and forbid ruinous rates of interest.³⁰

From this it should be evident that Luther's pronouncements against the Jews were not racial but religious. Luther's alleged anti-Semitism may be answered by Bornkamm's four points:

First, Luther's accounting with the Jews involves a religious principle. The crime of the Jews is of a religious nature: blasphemy of Christ. And Luther's goal, even

²⁸ WA, L, 336, quoted by Bornkamm, p. 228.

²⁹ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, pp. 379 f.

³⁰ Bornkamm, p. 232; Vogelsang, pp. 25 to 32.

though he entertained little hope of attaining it even to a modest degree, is also religious: the conversion of individual Jews. . . .

Secondly, in its official capacity the government has to proceed against such manifest blasphemy. . . .

Thirdly, the conversion of individual Jews remains the object of their public suppression. Even the severe suggestions in the writing *Of the Jews and Their Lies* were to serve their salvation. . . .

Fourthly, the usury of the Jews also arouses Luther's ire and indignation. . . . However, we must not overlook the fact

that it was not primarily the question of usury — clearly, this is only secondary — that provokes Luther's hostility toward the Jews. He has but one reason for his harshest counsel: "If we are to remain unsullied by the blasphemy of the Jews and do not wish to take part in it, we must be separated from them, and they must be driven out of the country."³¹

St. Louis, Mo.

³¹ Bornkamm, pp. 230—232, with reference to WA, LIII, 538. For a very comprehensive and well-organized compilation of "Luther on the Jews" see the St. Louis edition of his works, XXIII, 875—902. This compilation consists of some 8,500 words.