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Miscellanea

Luther's Attitude Toward the Jews Up to 1536 *

By RALPH MOELLERING

II

There is no indication that the young Luther either in his boyhood or during his university training had even accidental contacts with Jews. Perhaps his attention was first drawn directly to the Jewish question during the Pfefferkorn-Reuchlin controversy.

Fanatical Dominicans at Cologne, typified by Hochstraten and Ortuin de Craos of Deventer, were the most avid heresy hunters of the time. For their anti-Jewish activity they depended upon material supplied by baptized Jews. Victor von Karben was one of their most helpful collaborators. When he died in 1515, he was supplanted by Johann Pfefferkorn,¹ whose avowed intention was to convert his former co-religionists. In his *Joedenspiegel* (1507) he argued that it was unreasonable to refuse Christianity. He gives three reasons for the pertinacity of the Jews: (1) They were permitted to practice usury, (2) they were not compelled to attend the churches, and (3) they were obdurate in their attachment to the Talmud. In *Der Juden Beicht* (1508) he ridiculed Jewish rites practiced during the penitential days and on the Day of Atonement. *Der Juden Veindt* appeared the following year, with the assertion that all Jews were perjurers, that Jewish physicians deliberately killed Christians, and that all Jews must be either expelled or assigned to menial tasks.²

The Dominicans were zealous for action and introduced Pfefferkorn to Kunigunde, the sister of Maximilian, who had entered a Franciscan convent after a disappointing marriage. She listened with religious indignation to his accounts of Jewish blasphemy and addressed a pressing letter to the emperor, conjuring him to issue a decree against Jewish writings. But Pfefferkorn encountered

* This is the continuation of an essay whose first part was printed in our December, 1948, issue.

¹ According to Hirsch, *A Book of Essays*, p. 74: "A willing and energetic accessory in a conspiracy of the Dominicans of Cologne against Jewish wealth." Graetz holds to the theory that he was a Moravian butcher who was caught at burglary and who hoped to wipe out the disgrace by becoming a Christian. Ludwig Geiger, in his life of Reuchlin, denies that Pfefferkorn had been either a butcher or a burglar or that his conversion and subsequent persecutions of the Jews were dictated by mercenary motives.

² If Luther in his later period made use of the writings of Pfefferkorn, he does not mention it. And yet some observers might detect a parallel between the development of his position and that of the baptized Jew whom Geiger characterizes as a man of violent fanaticism, who attempted to convert the Jews to Christianity by writings and persuasion, and who became violent, abusive, and outrageous after he had been irritated by opposition. Cf. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

considerable opposition in putting the mandate into effect; and since Reuchlin was at the zenith of his fame at this time, it was no more than natural that he approached him in an effort to solicit his support. The eminent Hebraist declined to condemn all Jewish books indiscriminately. The best Christian commentaries on the Old Testament, he said, had borrowed from Jewish exegesis. The Hebrew writings on philosophy and natural science were contributions to the general field of learning and should not be distinguished from similar works in Greek, Latin, or German. He defended the cabalistic writings by pointing to Pico della Mirandola, who maintained that they contained the most solid foundation for the chief doctrines of Christianity. He advocated gentle means for leading the Jews to embrace Christianity.³ But the reactionaries at Cologne declared that all Talmudic writings should be seized and burned. Pfefferkorn attacked Reuchlin in his *Handspiegel*, calling him an apostate who was bribed by the Jews. Reuchlin was compelled to answer with *Augenspiegel* (1511), in which he protested his innocence of any illegal complicity with Jews and concluded that "a Christian should love a Jew as his neighbor."⁴

Hochstraten summoned him to appear at Mayence on the charge of heresy. Reuchlin appealed to Pope Leo X, and a tribunal was set up to pronounce judgment. The decision exonerated Reuchlin (1514), declaring that he had not displayed undue favoritism toward Jews and that his enemies were guilty of slander. The Cologne Dominicans were by no means satisfied, and the controversy soon spread all over Europe, with an informal association of Humanists backing Reuchlin, while the University of Paris decided against him. Maximilian assumed a vacillating position, but did not submit to demands that the Jews be banished throughout his realm. This he rebelled against as an encroachment on his suzerainty. The logomachy between Pfefferkorn and his rivals deteriorated into indecent vilification.⁵

Luther was still a student and monk while this dispute was raging, but he was not entirely detached from the proceedings. He openly favored Reuchlin, for whom he had the utmost respect and admiration. In response to an inquiry by George Spalatin he declared that he saw nothing heretical or dangerous in the position taken by the Hebrew grammarian.⁶ When Maximilian agreed to

³ Graetz, *History of the Jews*, Vol. IV, p. 442 ff. Meanwhile Pfefferkorn had written *Zu Lob und Ehre des Fuersten Maximilian* (1510), an attempt to exert moral pressure on the emperor.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 447-448.

⁵ In his last pamphlet Pfefferkorn had a picture of Reuchlin quartered and hanged. Hermann von Busche and Ulrich von Hutten composed a poem in which Reuchlin is depicted as triumphing over his enemies. The authors gloat over the cruel torture of Pfefferkorn, dwelling on the gory details in such a sadistic way that it will tend to arouse some sympathetic feelings in humane readers. Cf. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114.

⁶ Lewin, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden*, p. 1.

decree the confiscation of rabbinical literature, Luther said it would have been much better to turn the tables on the Dominicans and destroy their distortions of Scripture.⁷

Luther's estimate of the Jews developed in conjunction with his theology. Gleams of his general attitude were already reflected in his *Vorlesungen ueber den Psalter* (1513—16).⁸ The religious zeal of the Jews is misplaced, he thought. Their literal interpretation of the prophetic writings leads to confusion; their Messianic expectations are futile; their hope is carnal instead of spiritual; they are forever learning, but never understanding. They are devoid of true wisdom when they grope in the darkness of their ancient ignorance, rejecting newly revealed truth. Their prayers are useless. Their Savior will not arrive, because he is a figment of their own imagination. They are the slaves of a damning work-righteousness. They adhere rigidly to the Law of God in an outward formalism, but they fail to perceive the spirit of the Law.⁹ They have locked themselves outside the Kingdom of God. They have hardened themselves against partaking of God's grace. Arrogantly they cling to their errors, suffer persecution at the hands of their enemies, and will eventually be consigned to everlasting perdition.

Luther was probably prompted by the lectures of Reuchlin on the cabalistic writings to turn his attention to the Jewish *Geheimlehre*. He attacks the superstitious veneration for the Tetragram and the magical formulas, through which they hoped to appease God.¹⁰ There are indications in the *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519 to 1521)¹¹ that Luther does not despair of Israel's salvation. He is not in sympathy with those Christians who wish all manner of evil upon the Jews and gloat over their misfortune. Through their cruelty they prevent Jews from accepting Christianity. Luther is opposed to those "passion preachers" who misuse the Lenten season to incite hatred against the Jews.¹² In a petition for errorists he includes the Jews.¹³ It is noteworthy that he makes no specific mention of the Jews in either his short or his long sermon on usury in 1519. Apparently he did not think of the Jews as incurable usurers at this time.

But it would be an unwarranted conclusion to assume that Luther began his career with an altogether favorable opinion of

⁷ Cf. *Werke*, W. A., VIII, 52.

⁸ Cf. W. A., III, IV; Lewin, *op. cit.*, pp. 3—4.

⁹ "Es ist ihr Fehler, dass sie nur auf ihr Geschwaetz hoeren wollen und nichts geistig auffassen; sie verharren in ihrem toten Schrifttum, besudeln alles und verderben die Bibel." W. A., III, 587.

¹⁰ Luther views the Tetragram as a symbol of the Holy Trinity. Cf. W. A., V, 184 ff.

¹¹ W. A., V. See particularly the explanation of Psalm 14, 427 ff.

¹² W. A., II, 136. Cf. Sermon in W. A., XXXIII, 623 f.

¹³ W. A., VI, 16. *Ein kurze Form, das Paternoster zu verstehen* (1519).

the Jews.¹⁴ In 1510 the baptized Jew Johann Boeschenstein was called to Wittenberg as a lecturer in Hebrew, but displeased Luther immensely. The complaint was that he laid too much stress on prosody, as though his listeners were Jews. When he left, Luther passed the judgment on him: "In name a Christian, in reality a genuine Jew."¹⁵ He had similar experiences with his successor Matthias Adrianus, who only taught at Wittenberg for one year. When he asked for his dismissal, Luther wrote: "We have granted it to him immediately. So we are rid of this man."¹⁶ Certainly Luther was not attracted by what some would call "the peculiarities of the Jewish character."

Jewish critics of the Protestant Reformer like to emphasize his inadequate knowledge of Hebrew.¹⁷ However, we know that Luther had begun the study of Hebrew at the University of Erfurt. Through the medium of Reuchlin's *Grammar* he learned the elements of the Jews' sacred language as taught to Christians by Elias Levita. In April, 1519, he sent the *Grammar* of Moses Kimchi to Johann Lang. Petrus Mosellanus testified in December in his letter about the Leipzig Debate that Luther had learned enough Hebrew to be able to render judgments on interpretation. Together with Melanchthon he continued to study Hebrew during the following year. While he was at the Wartburg grappling with intricate problems in translation, he expressed the wish that he might receive instruction in Hebrew. Lewin interprets this as an admission of ignorance, but it is rather an indication of his eagerness to gain deeper insight into the meaning of the Masoretic text. Similarly, when a friend sent him a little Hebrew book and requested that he supply a table of contents and he declined to comply, it is not necessarily a confession of his inability to do so.¹⁸ It proves nothing to cite, as Newman does, Luther's statement: "How I hate people who lug in so many languages, as Zwingli does; he spoke Greek and Hebrew in the pulpit at Marburg." This does not demonstrate that Luther disliked Hebrew. He meant that it was unnecessary to obscure clear issues with abstract

¹⁴ Lewin believes that Luther had a narrow concept of the Jews grounded on Biblical patterns. His attitude was based on "blosse Buecherweisheit."

¹⁵ Luther wrote to his friend Johann Lang: "ille noster Boeschenstein nomine Christianus, re vera Judaissimus, ad nostrae Universitatis ignominiam recessit." Cf. Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform Movements*, p. 619.

¹⁶ Enders, *Luthers Briefwechsel*, 1, 278; 3, 87.

¹⁷ "His use of Jewish exegesis was usually secondhand." Cohn in the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, p. 241. "He did not go back to the original text; indeed, he admits that he was not a Hebrew scholar and especially that he knew nothing of Hebrew grammar," *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. VIII, Article on Luther. "Luther never mastered Hebrew, having a deep-seated distaste for Hebrew grammar, which, he asserted, was a concoction of the rabbis, studiously to be avoided," Newman, *op. cit.*, page 623.

¹⁸ January, 1525. Cf. Lewin, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

terminology. On occasion he felt obliged to defend the study of Hebrew, as when he said:

The Hebrew tongue is altogether despised because of impiety or perhaps because people despair of learning it. Without this language there can be no understanding of the Scriptures, for the New Testament, although written in Greek, is full of Hebraisms. It is rightly said that the Hebrews drink from the fountains; the Greeks from the streams, and the Latin from the pools. I am no Hebrew grammarian, nor do I wish to be; for I cannot bear to be hampered by rules, but *I am quite at ease in the language*. . . . The translators of the Septuagint were unskilled in Hebrew; and their version is extremely poor, even though literal. . . .¹⁹

Luther was convinced that he arrived at a better expression of the thought content of Scripture than those slavish grammarians who were content with a literal translation. They often missed the intended sense by conforming punctiliously to textbook rules.

Lewin would like to call the momentous days spent at Worms a "turning point in Luther's attitude toward the Jews." Presumably two Jews came to Worms seeking Luther's counsel. After they had exhilarated his spirits with a little wine, they asked him questions about the Scriptures. He refuted their assertion that the Hebrew word in Is. 7:14 could mean any young woman, not necessarily a virgin. One of the Jews agreed with Luther. The other opposed him. Such a heated argument ensued between the Jews that they almost came to blows and had to be forcibly evicted by the servants. According to Lewin's theory, there were completely new elements in this situation. For the first time Luther had come into actual contact with Jews. It was encouraging for him to discover that they welcomed social intercourse with him and flattering to know that they valued his advice. Perhaps they were not as incorrigible as he had assumed. After Worms, Luther recognized that he would have to break with Rome. He needed friends and support from other quarters. Besides, who could blame the Jews for rejecting Christianity if one considered that what they were offered was superstitious Romanism?

Lewin has projected an attractive assumption as a guide for his interpretation of Luther's later behavior, but the whole hypothesis bogs down when we investigate and discover that Luther never mentions this incident "of inestimable importance." The first report of it was not written down until twenty-eight years after Luther's death. Not only is the reliability of the story dubious, but the claim that such a trivial occurrence could create a profound and lasting impression upon the Reformer amid the world-shaking events at the Diet is open to question, to say the least.²⁰

¹⁹ Translated by Smith, P., in *Table Talks*, 1915, p. 181 f.

²⁰ Koestlin-Kawerau, *Martin Luther, sein Leben und seine Schriften*, 1903, I, p. 422; Heinrich Boehmer, *Der junge Luther*, Gotha, 1925, p. 371, consider the entire episode a legend. For a criticism of Lewin's theory cf. Walther, *Luther, die Juden, und die Antisemiten*, pp. 12—13.

Luther's "changed" attitude is supposed to be reflected already in writings composed at the Wartburg. In the *Magnificat* he states that the grace of God will result in the conversion of some Jews. He advises a more cordial approach on the part of Christians, but if they will not hear the truth, they should not be pampered.²¹ There is nothing sensational nor new in all this.

In 1523 there appeared Luther's first major writing concerning the Jews. The immediate incentive for *Dass Jesus Christus ein geborner Jude sei*²² was the credence given to the report that the new teaching denied the virgin birth of Christ. Luther was infuriated by the accusation and determined to answer this calumny without delay. At the same time he was not averse to including an appeal to the Jews to embrace Christianity.²³ He had previously expressed his conviction that heresy could not be prevented by force. God's Word alone must strive against it. "We learn it also from experience, for although all the Jews and heretics were burned, yet no one has been or will be convinced and converted thereby. . . ." ²⁴ Lewin is unwilling to credit Luther with proposing mild measures for dealing with heretics on his own initiative—he was merely promulgating sentiments which were already commonplace in Germany. But there is no proof that Luther would not have embarked on the course he pursued regardless of current attitudes. In an independent manner he was prepared to use winsome tactics. Undeniably his hopes ran high at this time. If the Christian faith should be presented to the Jews in its true light, he was confident that many of them would quickly recognize their errors and espouse the evangelical cause.

Luther states quite clearly the objective he had in mind when he wrote this treatise: "I shall from the Scripture mention the reasons which have moved me to believe that Christ was a Jew, born of a virgin, and perhaps I can also induce some of the Jews to believe in Christ."

The Jews can be censured too severely for their unbelief:

Our fools, the Popes, bishops, sophists, and monks, these uncouth jackasses (mule heads) have in the past so dealt with the Jews that whoever was a good Christian had just as well wished himself to be a Jew. And if I had been a Jew and had seen how these blockheads and dunces were controlling and teaching the Christian faith, I would rather have become a hog (sow) than a Christian.²⁵

Romanists have treated the Jews like dogs. They have been content with an *ex opere operato* performance of the sacramental

²¹ W. A., VII, p. 606 f. But Lewin insists: "Luther entwirft hiermit ein vollkommen neues Programm." *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

²² W. A., XI, S. L. A., XX:1792—1821. The argumentation on the fulfillment of prophecy appears to be derived from the *Postille* of Nicholas von Lyra.

²³ Lewin calls it a "Missionsschrift," *op. cit.*, p. 30.

²⁴ March, 1523, in *Von Weltlicher Oberkeit*, W. A., XI, p. 229 f.

²⁵ S. L. A., XX:1794.

rites. Indoctrination has been neglected. No wonder that the Jews find more vindication for Judaism in the Scriptures than for Christianity! Pious baptized Jews had assured Luther that they would never have accepted Christianity if they had not heard the Gospel as he presented it. Luther admonishes the Gentiles to treat the Jews sympathetically. If anyone has a right to boast of their heritage, the Jews are those people because they can claim blood relationship with our Lord. If the papists are weary of deriding him as a heretic, Luther suggests that they start chiding him as a Jew.

In the past, Luther concluded, the Jews had been proffered only a perverted version of Christianity. He is optimistic about a more favorable response when they are privileged to hear the pure Gospel. Every orthodox Jew cherishes the Old Testament. With this in mind, Luther plans an approach designed to persuade the Jews that what was predicted by the Prophets found an accurate fulfillment in the New Testament. One by one he takes up what he understands as Old Testament references to Christ. Gen. 3:15 already pointed to the Virgin Birth. Abraham's seed will be a blessing to future generations (Gen. 22:18) because the Messiah will be numbered among his descendants. 2 Sam. 7:12-14 does not refer to Solomon, but to Christ. With unmistakable clarity, Isaiah 7:14 directly foretells the Virgin Birth. In answer to the Jewish assertion that the Hebrew word *alma* may mean any young woman, married or unmarried, Luther insists that it is restricted in meaning to an unblemished virgin. *Alma* and *bethula* are interchangeable synonyms, but *alma* is better suited for the connection in which it is used here. The counterproposal adduced by the Jews that the sign spoken of consisted in the birth of a son rather than a daughter, Luther dismisses as "shameful and childish." Why would it be an extraordinary sign for a young wife to give birth to a son instead of a daughter? The Jews are foolish, too, when they object to the Virgin Birth on rational grounds. Anything is possible for God, who created all things out of nothing. Not only does Luther defend the virgin birth of Christ, but he contends vehemently against those who would abolish the *perpetua virgo* concept of Mother Mary. The suspicion that Mary ever had children in a natural manner tramples on the sanctity of her honored position as the mother of God. In this respect Luther was still a good Roman Catholic.

In considerable detail, Luther takes up Gen. 49:10-12, maintaining that *Shilo* should be identified with the Messiah. This prophecy cannot refer to the Babylonian Captivity. At the same time it must have been fulfilled before the destruction of Jerusalem. *Shilo* must be a natural man who dies and yet rules eternally. Only Christ can fill this description. In Daniel 9:24 ff. the angel Gabriel makes a plain reference to Christ.

Luther's endeavor to win the Jews admits of no doctrinal compromise. He expects to shatter their false Messianic dreams

with incontrovertible exegesis. He has no doubts about the soundness of his chain of reasoning.

But Luther is willing to exercise patience. The Jews should first be introduced to the human Jesus before being required to accept the deity of Christ.²⁶ He advises a tactful approach and expresses contempt for the unfounded suspicions of Christians. He excuses their practice of usury. They are denied equal opportunity in lawful occupations.

Luther's work on the Jews was widely read. Within about eight months it went through not less than nine reprints. Justus Jonas translated it into Latin and commended it highly in a letter to Andreas Rem.²⁷ Previously the Jews have been misled by their Talmud. Under the tutelage of the Great Reformer some of them will come to Christ.

Walther asserts that other writers on the Jewish question began to share his friendly, optimistic outlook.²⁸ In 1537 Luther could write to Josel von Rosheim: "My writing has served the welfare of the whole of Jewry."²⁹ That there was some truth in Luther's declaration seems to be substantiated by the sudden cessation of persecutions. The Jews had been driven out of Nuremberg in 1498, Noerdlingen in 1506, Regensburg in 1519, and Rottenburg in 1520. Not until about 1536 was there a fresh outburst of violence against the Jews. Even the Jewish historian Graetz must confess that Luther's favorable writing on the Jews contained "words which they had not heard for a thousand years."³⁰

Luther sent a copy of *Dass Jesus Christus ein geborner Jude sei* to the converted Jew Bernhard,³¹ with the wish that it would strengthen his own faith and might help him in convincing his earlier *Glaubensgenossen* to become Christians. In his letter Luther reveals that some individuals had expressed their doubts about the genuineness of Jewish conversions, but Luther preferred to believe that they relapsed into Judaism out of gross ignorance, not out of obduracy. Their experience with Christians had been limited to the papists and monks who had set a lamentable example with their hypocrisy and immorality. What a false impression they had gained! Now that the golden light of the Gospel had started to shine in Europe, it was likely that many

²⁶ In a sermon of Feb. 14, 1524, Luther says that if a Jew comes to him who is not stubborn and whom he wants to bring to Christ, he would not begin by telling him that Christ is God's Son. He would first instill in him a love for the Lord Jesus, telling him that He was a man sent by God. Later he would follow up and explain that Christ was God. W. A., XV, p. 447.

²⁷ S. L. A., XX:1822, No. 48 b.

²⁸ *Luther, die Juden, und die Antisemiten*, p. 17.

²⁹ S. L. A., XX:1826 ff., No. 49.

³⁰ *History of the Jews*, Vol. IV, p. 471.

³¹ Formerly, Rabbi Jakob Gipher, who married a daughter of Carlstadt and supported himself by teaching Hebrew.

more from Abraham's seed would follow in the footsteps of Bernhard.³²

Lewin intimates that Luther was not prompted solely by unselfish motives in his effort to win the Jews. A personal ambition to prove the truth of his teaching by doing what the Romanists had been unable to do—triumph over the synagog—dictated his actions during this period.³³ He was blinded by an unbounded enthusiasm to convert the Jewish people en masse to Christianity.³⁴ But all this is demonstrably untenable. Nowhere does he make sweeping statements that would justify Lewin's deduction. It is an exaggeration to claim that he became such an elated visionary that he expected the new religion suddenly to supplant Judaism. His expectations were on a more moderate level.

But it is true that his ardor for the Jewish cause was gradually dampened by subsequent disappointments. We cannot agree that his change in attitude was due to a frustrated ambition or a vitriolic old age, but disillusioned he became. Instead of many conversions, there were few. Instead of responding to his appeals, the Jews were encouraged to become more vociferous in proclaiming their own faith. Messianic expectations were aroused. Luther was hailed as Messiah's forerunner. The revival of Hebrew learning among Christian scholars was interpreted as another sign of the coming glory of Israel.

Luther's theological development after 1523 accentuated the breach with Rome. By research and from experience the Reformer was confirmed in his convictions. Doctrinal formulations began to crystallize in his mind. His enemies had abandoned the pristine purity of the Apostolic Church and contaminated it with human innovations and traditions. Luther was fighting against a spiritual tyranny which perpetuated itself through a system of sacerdotalism and sacramentalism. The priesthood of all believers with direct access to God and the sole authority of Scripture with the Pauline emphasis on justification by faith alone were the fundamental tenets of the Lutheran theologians. No compromise on these points was admissible.

Reprehensible as the papists were, Luther was slowly impressed by the thought that the Jews were even worse. They denied Christ altogether. More and more Luther classified Jews with heathen and Turks.³⁵ He seemed to discover considerable

³² S. L. A., XX:1822, No. 48 c.

³³ *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden*, pp. 34—35.

³⁴ Cf. Newman, *op. cit.*, pp. 620—621. Luther is compared to St. Paul, who is depicted as a philo-Semite, who became disillusioned, and then vehemently opposed the Jews. Luther is supposed to have followed the tactics of Mohammed, who first gratefully acknowledged the value of Jewish literature, but became infuriated when they refused to acclaim Allah and Mohammed, his prophet.

³⁵ E. g., *Concerning the Handbook Against the Peasants*, W. A., XVIII, pp. 384—401; *A Reply to the Twelve Articles*, W. A., XVIII, p. 291 ff. Cf. Hol. Ed., IV.

similarity between all his foes. Unbelief was their common ailment. Their proud reason refused to bend before the inexplicable mysteries of God. Denouncing the Catholic teaching on penance, he writes: "How does this faith differ from the faith of Turks and heathen and Jews? All of them, too, would make satisfaction by their works. . . ." ³⁶

Intensive Biblical studies after 1523 forced Luther to study the commentaries of the rabbis. Partly he used the sources. Often he found it convenient to resort to the studies made by other Christians.³⁷ One of his favorite authorities was Antonius Margaritha, the son of a rabbi at Regensburg and the first professor of Hebrew in Vienna. Luther found his book *The Entire Jewish Faith* (1530) particularly valuable.³⁸ Additional material for his later accusations against the Jews was supplied by the Jewish apostate Paul of Burgos (1350—1435) in his *Perfidy of the Jews*. The Altenburg preacher Wenceslaus Linck issued a translation of the Epistle of Rabbi Samuel of Morocco, supposed to have been written about 1100.³⁹ Also in the Reformer's hands were the *Victoria adversus impios Hebraeos* by Salvagus Porchetus, perhaps the *Fugio Fidei* by Raymund Martinus, and the works of a number of rabbis, especially of Samuel Raschi.⁴⁰

The consequences of Luther's advance in learning and experience on the Jewish question were largely negative. He read several of the prayers in their Hebrew books and was repelled by their arrogance and presumption.⁴¹ He concludes that the good will he has shown the Jews has only strengthened them in their errors and made them more malicious. They have shamefully abused his friendly overtures.⁴² In the light of more mature knowledge he later wrote:

What we have permitted up to now out of ignorance (I had not known it myself) God will forgive us. Now, however, we are aware of the facts; and if we defend and protect the Jews in spite of it, that would be the same as if we did it ourselves.⁴³

Luther had taken a definite stand against the punishment of

³⁶ In *Exhortation to the Clergy at Augsburg* (1530), Hol. Ed., Vol. IV, p. 341; cf. p. 356. Cf. W. A., XXX, p. 288 ff.

³⁷ Walther, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

³⁸ A systematic argumentation against Jews consisting of three parts: (1) an exposition of the Jewish faith with a description of their ceremonies and festivals; (2) a disclosure of their avidity for usury, their enmity against Christianity, and their hatred of government; and (3) a refutation of their Messianic hopes. Cf. Geiger, *Die Juden und die deutsche Literatur*, p. 325.

³⁹ Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 627.

⁴⁰ Reu, *Luther and the Jews*, p. 595.

⁴¹ E. A., LXII, p. 366.

⁴² Cf. E. A., LV, p. 186 f.

⁴³ In *Von den Juden und ihren Luegen*, S. L. A., XX:1990, 299; E. A., XXXII, p. 234.

heretics.⁴⁴ "Faith is free. What could a heresy trial do? No more than make people agree by mouth or in writing; it could not compel the heart."⁴⁵ In an effort to prevent the outbreak of the Peasants' Revolt (1525) he wrote: "Indeed no ruler ought to prevent anyone from teaching or believing what he pleases, whether Gospel or lies. It is enough if he prevents the teaching of sedition and rebellion."⁴⁶ Gradually Luther began to justify persecution on the basis of a distinction between heresy and blasphemy. Blasphemy he defined as a denial of the divinity of Christ or any manifest article of faith, clearly grounded in Scripture and generally accepted throughout Christendom.

As a rule, he was more mild than his contemporaries in the punishments he advocated. In an exposition of Psalm 82, written in 1530, Luther discusses the obligations of princes and appends the question: "Shall rulers put down heresy?" Rebels against constituted authority should be promptly and severely punished because they are in the same class with thieves and murderers. False teachers cannot be tolerated if they make propaganda for their dangerous beliefs, because they are in the same class with those who curse God and slander their neighbor.

By this procedure no one is compelled to believe, for he can still believe what he will; but he is forbidden to teach and blaspheme. For, by so doing, he would take from God and the Christians their doctrine and word, and he would do them this injury under their own protection. . . . Let him go some place where there are no Christians. . . .

Luther is not thinking primarily of the Jews, because he is preoccupied with controversies involving the Romanists and the Anabaptists, but he adds:

Someone, however, may enter the further objection: "We ought not to punish these blasphemers or prevent them, because we tolerate the Jews, who blaspheme the Lord Christ and His mother, with all the saints and all Christians, both in their teaching and their speaking." Answer: They have their punishment for this in that they are outside the Church and cannot hold any public office; and even as it is, they are not allowed to utter this blasphemy publicly. Much less are they permitted to attempt preaching in corners, as do these poisonous sneaks, who are not willing to cast the poison of their blasphemy upon any except those who are baptized and are called Christians. Moreover, they are not willing to be considered useless by the world, like the Jews, but . . . if they were to go . . . where, like the Jews, they would be heard by no one, then we would let them blaspheme to the stones and trees in some forest or possibly in the depths of the sea or in a hot oven.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ "The burning of heretics is contrary to the will of the Holy Spirit," in *Argument in Defense of the Articles of Martin Luther*, Hol. Ed., Vol. III, pp. 103 ff. Cf. W. A., I, p. 624; VII, 309 ff.

⁴⁵ Quoted by Smith, P., *The Age of the Reformation*, p. 643.

⁴⁶ *Admonition to Peace: An Answer to the Twelve Articles*, Hol. Ed., Vol. IV, p. 224. Cf. W. A., XVIII, p. 291 ff.

⁴⁷ W. A., XXX, Part I, 212.

Luther still does not advocate harsh treatment of the Jews, but he has a low estimate of their role as outsiders in the community. As long as they follow their religion quietly and do not rival Christianity with claims of equality or superiority, he will be lenient.

At first Luther was overjoyed to hear of the readiness of some Jews to be baptized. He was shocked when he discovered that many took the step "um eigenen Nutzens willen" rather than out of a desire for salvation. In the summer of 1530, when Pastor Genesius of Ichtershausen asked Luther in what form he should administer Baptism to a Jewish girl, his response is indicative of his undiminished interest in the conversion of the Jews, but he has become increasingly skeptical. He advises his follower to exert caution until he ascertains that the girl is not feigning faith in Christ.

These people play the hypocrite in a faithless way. I do not doubt that there are still children of Abraham who belong to Christ. But up until now the Jews have frequently made a mockery of our faith. Warn the poor, therefore, that they do not deceive them. But if they are genuine, then I wish them grace and perseverance. Extend to them my greeting in Christ, and tell them that I am ready to serve them in love.⁴⁸

Sometime during this period Luther made his oft-quoted statement about leading a pious Jew to the Elbe bridge, hanging a stone around his neck, and throwing him down with the words: "I baptize you in the name of Abraham."⁴⁹ It would be presumptuous to infer too much from a remark which was probably spoken in a jocular vein at the table.

Many Jews who traveled through Wittenberg enjoyed Luther's hospitality. On one occasion three stayed over to discuss Jer. 23:6, which for Luther proved the deity of Christ. What disgusted Luther most was their unwillingness to let the Scriptures interpret themselves. They insisted that they were obliged to cling to their rabbis as authorities just as Christians respected the authority of the Pope.⁵⁰ They expressed the hope that Christians, through their study of Hebrew literature, would recognize the truth of Judaism.⁵¹ When Luther gave them "Empfehlungsbriege," they were offended because he wrote: "Man moege ihnen 'um Christenwillen' [sic] foerderlich sein."⁵²

⁴⁸ Enders, *op. cit.*, 8, 92. So often did the Jews carry on this deception that Luther many times in his sermons carefully examined the question whether their Baptisms were valid. When a Jew again desired Baptism from Luther, he answered: "If you are sincere, we will gladly admit you to our church service. I am kindly disposed toward all Jews for the sake of one pious Jew, who was born from your race. But you rarely remain faithful." Walther, *op. cit.*, p. 19, quoting Mathesius, 343.

⁴⁹ Lewin, *op. cit.*, p. 37. The reference is from the *Tischreden*, which makes it of dubious import.

⁵⁰ Cf. W. A., XX, p. 569 f.

⁵¹ Cf. E. A., XXXII, p. 156.

⁵² Cf. Walther, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

Luther was shamefully deceived by a Jew for whom he collected alms.⁵³ Frequent warnings told him about the plots of Jews who were intending to poison him. Lewin implies that much of his information came from "eifrige Zutraeger," who were unreliable Jew baiters. In 1535 a pregnant woman came to Luther with her problem but concealed her real name. He was deeply stirred when he later learned that she was the sister of a friend and had been seduced by a Jew.⁵⁴ Luther does not mention any of these occurrences in his sharp writings against the Jews, but they undoubtedly colored his opinions. He was beginning to delineate the Jewish character in terms of "Unwahrhaftigkeit und Geldgier."

Luther never hoped for a mass conversion of the Jews, as Lewin tries to prove. Walther is more accurate when he writes: "Nie hat Luther mehr gehofft, als dasz sich 'etliche,' vielleicht im Vergleich zu fruher 'viele,' aber im Vergleich zu der Masse der Juden nur 'wenige,' zu Christus bekehren wuerden."⁵⁵ And this hope was at least partially fulfilled. Disappointment was not the decisive cause for Luther's change in attitude.

More basic were the tensions created by religious controversy. Luther had anticipated considerable success among the Jews by employing arguments found in the Old Testament, their own sacred canon. To his surprise he found that they adhered more closely to the Talmud and their traditions.⁵⁶ When he studied the rabbinical literature, he was repelled by their haughty self-assurance. He began to write in a satirical tone about their arrogance, which was so incongruous with their wretched state. What incensed him a great deal was that they dared to elevate themselves above all Christians, scorning the Gentiles for their ignoble birth.⁵⁷

Worst of all, the Jews spoke disdainfully of what Luther held most inviolable. Tolerated as strangers in Christian communities, they had the impudence to mock and curse the holiest thing among Christians. They reviled Christ as a magician and an instrument of the devil. They called Him a bastard, and His mother Mary a prostitute who had illegal intercourse with a smith. As Hebel Vorik Christ was the personification of falsehood. They took a heinous delight in contemplating His crucifixion, calling Him *Thola* (hung one).⁵⁸ Luther suspected that the Jews wrote even worse things about Christians than he had read. He knew that they spread the most vicious blasphemies imaginable about the Savior.

⁵³ Cf. Enders, *op. cit.*, X, p. 247

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, X, p. 186; 198 ff.; 208.

⁵⁵ *Luther, die Juden, und die Antisemiten*, p. 20.

⁵⁶ Cf. E. A., XXXII, 258: "Sie sagen, sie muessten ihren Rabbinen glauben, wenn dieselben gleich sagten, die rechte Hand waere die linke."

⁵⁷ Cf. E. A., XXXII, 129: "Und ist des Ruehmens von Gebluet und leiblicher Geburt von den Vaetern kein Mass noch Ende."

⁵⁸ Cf. W. A., XXVI, p. 171.

No people, he discovered, were more avaricious than the Jews. Christians are warned against the practice of usury, but Jews are encouraged to engage in it. "Deservedly are these robbers driven into banishment on account of their impenitence and their usury,"⁵⁹ he exclaimed at the table in 1536.

Jews also demoralized the Christian community by fostering superstitions. Already at the time of the church visitations in Electoral Saxony, Luther was astounded at the number of books found with magical Jewish symbols among the village pastors. He was afraid that alchemy and other false arts were being used to swindle the plain, gullible Christians.⁶⁰ Joachim II of Brandenburg was warned by Luther when he trusted in a group of Jews who wanted to teach him how to make money. The admonition was in vain, but proved to be in place. After a while the Elector discovered that the Jews had deceived him, but it was too late. They fled, and only one was apprehended.⁶¹

Two fundamental errors in Judaism which repeatedly evoke vigorous criticism from the pen of the Reformer are their system of work-righteousness and their expectation of a worldly Messiah. They hold rigorously to their outmoded Law and lack love and evangelical freedom. But some Jews will be saved in fulfillment of God's promise.⁶² Luther's change in feeling was not strong enough to require any restatement of his position. There is still an underlying consistency in his whole outlook.

The exegetical method applied by Hebrew commentators disgusted Luther. He rejects a grammatical appraisal of the text according to stringent rules. To learn a language, you should become acquainted with its usage. To grasp the sense of a passage is the key to correct interpretation, not to be bound by the words, which are but a channel for the flow of ideas. The errors of Christian scholars, like Augustine, were caused by the misleading literature of the Jews. At times he had been unduly swayed by their opinions himself, and he is annoyed because he must now retract exegesis which he had written earlier. They twist and pervert the meaning of the Scriptures to suit their own preconceived notions. They approach it with a prejudiced mind, ignoring the natural implications of Messianic prophecies. For them everything must have a physical sense; so they fail to catch the spiritual significance of what they read. They are blinded by the oral and written traditions of their earlier teachers. Until they view the Old Testament in the light of the New Covenant, they

⁵⁹ Quoted by MacKinnon, *Luther and the Reformation*, Vol. IV, page 195.

⁶⁰ Cf. Walther, *op. cit.*, pp. 23—26.

⁶¹ Cf. Enders, *op. cit.*, VI, pp. 192 f., 217. Lewin conveniently omits mention of the accurate advice which Luther gave. (*Op. cit.*, p. 104 f.)

⁶² Cf. W. A., XIII, pp. 84, 576 f.; XXV, 303; XXVII, 13; XXXII, 208, 239.

cannot, and they will not, understand it. Paul says that the veil of Moses remains over the Bible for anyone who denies Christ.⁶³

Luther takes the Jewish punctuators severely to task for attempting to remove from prophecy the prediction of the divinity of the coming Messiah.⁶⁴ Concerning their interpretation of Ps. 2:7 he complains: "Whether the Jews are so exceedingly wicked that they distort such passages or ignore them is beside the question. Their objections are nothing but their own imagination, without any Scriptural warrant, invented for the purpose of evasion."⁶⁵

Grisar sees an additional factor contributing toward Luther's growing hostility in that he resented criticisms of his Old Testament translation.⁶⁶ Sebastian Muenster said that it could be improved upon by a more accurate understanding of the original text. As a pupil of Elias Levita, he prepared his own Latin translation of the Hebrew Bible in 1534, with annotations from the rabbinical commentaries. Luther appreciated his scholarship, but criticized his "Judaizing" tendencies. He became so critical of Jewish scholarship that he urged Christian students to specialize in the study of Hebrew so that more Christ-centered interpretations of the Old Testament would be available.⁶⁷

A careful study of Luther's attitude toward the Jews up to 1536 will persuade the honest investigator of the erroneousness and inaccuracy of bluntly and unreservedly describing him as either "hopelessly prejudiced by medieval superstitions" or as "the herald of modern anti-Semitism." Neither is true. Luther was first and foremost a theologian who never questioned the foundations of his faith. To place Judaism on the same pedestal with the teachings of the Christ he loved so dearly was utterly unthinkable. A brotherhood of Christians and Jews based on mutual toleration would have appeared ridiculous to him or anyone else in the sixteenth century. Hoping for the conversion of many Jews at the outset of his career, he experienced disappointments and gradually shifted from the offensive to the defensive. By 1536 we find that he was already less concerned about making Jews Christians and more concerned about safeguarding Christians from Jews.

The next and final installment will dwell on Luther's later attitude toward the Jews and present a summary.

Vermillion, S. Dak.

⁶³ Cf. *Preface to the Prophet Ezekiel*, Hol. Ed., Vol. VI, p. 412; W. A., XIV, 174 ff.; XXV, 87 f.

⁶⁴ Cf. Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures*, p. 104.

⁶⁵ W. A., L, 28.

⁶⁶ *Luther*, Vol. III, p. 348.

⁶⁷ Cf. S. L. A., XX, *Vom Schem Hamphoras*, 2029 ff.; E. A., 32, 356-358.