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Luther Against Luther: Scripture and Christian anti-Semitism
Past Realities and Future Remedies

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Luther Against Luther

Scripture and Christian anti-Semitism: Past Realities and Future Remedies

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The Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary's annual Luther Lecture is sponsored by Mary Carlton Lull and the Lull family in memory of Rev. Timothy Lull, president of the Seminary from 1997 to 2003. The 2018 lecture is delivered jointly by Professors Kirsi Stjerna and Brooks Schramm. Professor Stjerna is Los Angeles/Southwest California Synod Professor of Lutheran History and Theology at PLTS and is a member of the core doctoral faculty at the GTU. Professor Schramm is Kraft Professor of Biblical Studies (Hebrew Bible) at the United Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg and Philadelphia.

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ORIENTING WITH FREEDOM THEOLOGY

Kirsi I. Stjerna

For starters, this is how we approach Luther and his theological heritage here at the Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary: Our lens is *freedom*.

The Lutheran theological heritage values freedom. This core value speaks of Luther's fundamental theological insight, drawn from the

Scriptures, about the existential freedom found in grace-based living, and the equality and justice it entails in terms of human relations.

The ultra-Lutheran expression "justification by faith" names freedom on the fundamental level of human existence: freedom from regrets, freedom for new beginnings. It speaks of spiritual freedom that is not apart from politically construed freedoms.

Lutheran theology underscores freedom as a divine gift and a right of every human being. Lutheran Christian identity involves intentionality in expressing this radical love in different aspects of human relations and, when necessary, to stand against the anti-freedom powers and structures in our world. Lutheran witness calls for a vocal presence – even faithful rebellion - in the affairs of our world.

We have heard the story of Luther's theologically stimulated rebellion so often that we may have become numb to the radicalness of it: a lonely monk-preacher-professor challenging the entire spiritual empire and, even if unwillingly, gaining a political voice. He was told to be quiet and "take it back". He listened to his conscience and spoke not less but more. He was punished, threatened, outlawed, excommunicated. Still he did not stop, not until his last breath.

It is worth nothing that Luther reacted at great personal risk when he saw that religion was failing to do what it was supposed to do.

Yet Luther was no superman, no better person than you and I. He had no great external powers or authority. Where did he get his stimulus, or *chutzpah*, then?

We can discern his sources of empowerment: (1) His reading of the Scriptures and hearing there the transformative Word of law and gospel that was not, in his view, properly proclaimed, experienced, or realized; the Word made him squirm and acutely aware of his surroundings. (2) His witnessing of urgent human issues around him, combined with the existential Angst he felt personally. Reading his *Ninety-Five Theses*, we can read his resolution after his awakening of a sort: something had to be said and done, on a whole lot of issues.

Luther had not figured out exactly what and how and with what consequences but - he acted anyway, feeling compelled to do so. With the issues he identified as urgencies, he felt it was a matter of integrity and identity as a Christian, that there are times to "stand – and speak out - right here" (for the sake of the truth expressed in the Scriptures and in the face of acute human needs).

We could imagine, what would be the issues that would stoke up Luther today, and what level of resistance would he be willing to engage? Would he be happy tweeting and coffee shop ranting, or would he do more? Well, it is safe to assume that Luther would most definitely tweet and utilize all the media available to mobilize Christians with the issues needing attention. He would not stay home and safe and unengaged.

Thinking of our world and the burning issues of our world, let's imagine: What might Luther say about anti-Semitism? What might he say about racism?

The two words are related in common usage – while neither of the words were used by or of Luther in his time. But in light of what we know what all is and has been involved with anti-Semitism and Jew-hatred, we have reasons to associate the terms. And in light of what we know about how Luther's name has been -fairly or unfairly – evoked in discussions on the history of anti-Semitism, we have valid reasons to bring Luther and his legacy actively into the conversation.

Was Luther a Jew-hater? Yes, in his own words. Was he a racist? Not in his words but yes in our assessment as far as he argued against the Jews as people.

Beaming Luther here, what would he say? What would he say, if he learned that *he* is featured in an educational film on anti-Semitism at the Holocaust Memorial museum in Washington DC, and if he knew of the crimes against humanity committed by the Nazis who did, to a degree, evoke his memory to support their agendas that led to crimes against humanity? It is safe to surmise that the very idea that once upon a time the Nazi flag flew up on the balcony of his beloved Black Cloister/Lutherhalle would have been scandalous to him.

Luther has received more attention with the issue of anti-Semitism than his contemporaries. He simply is the most famous of them all, and his words were lustily printed and spread wide and broad. And yes, he wrote a lot, also about the Jews, throughout his career. It is particularly his explicitly anti-Jewish texts from 1543 that have brought Luther's anti-Semitism under scrutiny – and that is a good thing.

What did he write? Amidst all the myriad of texts that he wrote, scholarly attention with this question has targeted these texts:[1]

1523 → That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew (LW 45:199-229; TAL 5; WA 11:314-336)

1538 → Against the Sabbatarians (LW 47:65-98; WA 50:312-37)

1543 → On the Jews and Their Lies (LW 47:137-306; TAL 5; WA 53:417-552)

1543 → On the Ineffable Name (WA 53: 579-648; TAL 5)

1543 → On the Last Words of David (LW 15:265-352; WA 54:28-100)

1546 → Admonition against the Jews (LW 58)

These are by no means the only texts to consider with this question, there are many others to include, such as these often-overlooked sources:

1526 → Commentary on Ps. 109 (LW 14)

1537 → Letter to Rabbi Josel of Rosheim[2]

1543 → Lecture on Isa. 9 (WA 40/3)

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[1] For the rest of this lecture, the following abbreviations will be utilized:
LW: ***Luther's Works***, eds. Helmut Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press/St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986).
TAL: ***The Annotated Luther,*** eds. Hans J. Hillerbrand, Kirsi I. Stjerna, and Timothy J. Wengert, 6 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015-2017).
WA: Martin Luther, ***Luthers Werke****: Kritische Gesamtausgabe,* 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-2009).

[2] See M. Luther, "Text #16. Letter to Josel of Rosheim (1537)," in *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People: A Reader,* eds. Brooks Schramm and Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 126-128. Hereafter abbreviated as "Schramm/Stjerna."

1544 → Lecture on Isa. 53 (WA 40/3)

The most famous words from Luther regarding his attitudes towards the Jews come from the notorious "On Jews and Their Lies" (1543).[3] He wrote…

… to the Civil Authorities:
1] Burn down Synagogues
2] Destroy Jewish homes
3] Confiscate Prayer Books and Talmudic writings
4] Forbid Rabbis to teach
5] Abolish safe-conduct for Jews
6] Prohibit Usury to the Jews
7] Enforce manual labor on the Jews

… to Pastors and Preachers:
1] Burn down Synagogues
2] Confiscate Prayer Books, Talmudic writings, and the Bible
3] Prohibit Jewish Prayer and Teaching
4] Forbid Jews to utter the name of God publicly

We can hear here some dangerous words that need careful interpretation and contextualization – as well as explicit rejection, repeatedly. If for no other reason, then this: very similar programmatic moves were implemented by the Nazis in Europe, leading to the Holocaust.

Now, let's make one thing clear: the 16th century reformer Martin Luther was not the cause of the Holocaust. That is not what we are talking about here. We are reckoning that we live in a world that struggles with the horrendous memory of the Holocaust, and we must consider the dangerous power of words and how they can be used and misused. Luther's name was and has been explicitly evoked in defense of anti-Semitic actions. We are not talking about history only; today the expressions of anti-Semitism are on the rise again and there are actually individuals in the world who might wish to ally with Luther in their hateful agendas.

It is probably helpful to think of the words we use and how they relate to Luther in our minds, and how he might not know what we

[3] See M. Luther, "Text #23. On the Jews and Their Lies (1543)" in Schramm/Stjerna, pp. 164-176.

are talking about. The 19th century word anti-Semitism would not have been the word known for Luther; anti-Jewish would be the correct one in that regard. Similarly, the word racism might have made little if any sense to Luther, who was fanatic about religious matters and to whom ethnicity did not appear to be an issue, and who lived in quite a "white" world, for us it is important to make explicit connections between the words that historically and today relate to hate-crimes, with different rationales.

The reasons for using the word "racism" in this context are many but naming two: (1) it is the post-Holocaust reality that calls for that – because Nazi ideology was indisputably racist-ly oriented, and (2) the evidence that in Luther's culture Jews were portrayed in similarly ethnic-specifically derogatory terms as has happened, e.g., in US with persons of color.

Nazi ideology and acts were crimes against humanity; with a racially based ideology, orchestrated killings aimed to extinguish an ethnic group. We can call Nazis' actions racist because to them themselves, anti-Semitism was absolutely racially oriented. Whereas several other groups were also targeted (homosexuals, Roma, people with disabilities, etc.), the very special hatred towards the Jews can be considered the engine, the stimulus, for the multiplication of targeted hate.

Luther's arguments were about other things. Not about skin color or ethnic DNA. His focus was the love of his life: The Bible. Its proper interpretation. To whom it belongs, and with that: Who are the elect and who hears the voice of God for real? To whom does God speak? Who understands the revelation about and of Christ correctly?

We know well, we celebrate, Luther's liberating findings with the Scriptures and how successfully he conveyed his transformative spiritual experience with the Word – while we do want to take issue with him about the exclusive and normative "tone" expressed in his proclamation. We can identify – from what we know from human history – the danger of any religious conviction that is exclusive and denigrates the dignity and rights of the fellow human beings. We

know, we have seen enough, how religious convictions can lead to genocides, murdering of entire peoples. This is not medieval history but has been happening in our lifetime. Religion is powerful!

I believe that, hearing of what we know of the human capacity for evil in the forms of genocides, Luther would be horrified. Vis-à-vis the question of Jews and anti-Semitism, he would probably say what he said after the Peasants were slaughtered, with his unfortunate involvement – "No, no, no, no, *tausendmal nein*, that's not what I meant! When I said burn the synagogues, burn the Torahs, forbid Jews from teaching their faith, to silence the rabbis and prohibit Jewish prayer, I did not mean 'kill' human beings."

Quite the contrary, he would probably quote his own words in "That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew" (1523), urging Christians to treat the Jews nicely, not like dogs– as Christians of his time were known for doing – because if that is what being Christian meant, who in their right mind would want to be with them![4]

It is true that Luther wrote about the Jews, a lot, and most often than not, not in a positive tone. While he loved the biblical Jews – the heroes and heroines of faith – and while he imagined Christians and Jews together in the garden of Eden as one family of God's children, he also used the concept "Jew" to make his most salient points about the futility of a religion that relies on self-righteousness and human effort. He had burned himself out on that, he had zero tolerance for that. Salvation, being made right with God, must be free. Otherwise, it's not grace. Otherwise, what's the point of Christ then?! Luther, a lover of Christ, and whose own life had transformed with his personal encounter with Christ – in the Word – was a zealot about this: Christ had died so that we don't have to, and Christ had died and resurrected so that we don't have to earn God's love – which we couldn't anyway.

So the word Jews signifies different things for Luther: (1) the biblical ancestor of faith (like Eve, like Sara), and (2) the symbol/embodiment of works righteousness. (3) Jew also symbolized

[4] See M. Luther, "Text #7. That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew (1523)" in Schramm/Stjerna, pp. 76-83.

for Luther stubbornness and blindness, not seeing the truth, God's own revelation. (4) Then, the Jew meant for Luther the "elect", God's people – actually, he came to see Christians in this category – with the converted Jews included. (5) Then there were the practicing Jews of his time that Luther found most problematic – why, oh why would they follow a dead religion, he wondered! Because, in his opinion, the Jewish religion had to be dead and Moses had to be dead – otherwise, Jews might he been right all along and what would that mean for Christians and the entire Christian faith?

It was the practicing Jews that Luther in the end of his life came to have a big problem with: they simply had to leave. Out of sight was the best. This would have meant, if the rulers followed Luther's opinion on the matter, that the Jews would have lost one of the last relatively safe places in Western Europe. Namely, Jews had been expulsed from many European countries since the 12th century and by the 16th century, German speaking lands were still accepting Jew, under special stipulations (changeable overnight, though).

Luther considered it was his responsibility as a Christian teacher to assist in this "stopping" the dead Jewish religion by: (1) refuting it doctrinally and hermeneutically and claiming the Scriptures as a Christian Book, (2) assisting Jews in finding home somewhere else, in the east.

Speaking of: since most Jews were constantly on the move – forced to do so by Christian rulers and ordinances – and had been expelled from most Christian countries and cities, what actual exposure did Luther have with Jewish faith and people? Very little. He did not know any practicing Jews. There were no Jews in Wittenberg. This means, much of his "Jew-talk" is imaginary, and more about his theology, and ultimately, about the love of his life: the Scriptures.

He "knew" of the Jewish writings though - better than the Rabbis, as he considered himself, and as he vehemently and consistently sought to refute the rabbinic interpretation, and blatantly refused any in-person conversations. In alignment with Christians' historic supersessionist logic – which he did not invent but

certainly ran with – he did not see a point to entertain Christian-alternate views. (Let's remember this: Luther and his contemporaries were not exactly into friendly interfaith existence and exploration. The word xenophobia would be a way to describe their instinctive orientation.)

To conclude, in my shared work with Dr. Brooks Schramm, we have come to see the evidence that for Luther, at the root of the problems and solutions is the Bible, the book of life, and its "proper" interpretation. Luther was committed to reading it right, not wanting to miss on God's voice. The question of Luther's attitudes and writings against the Jewish religion, then, cannot be ascertained apart from attention to Luther's main personal and professional task, the reading of the Scriptures. That has been our thesis and the foundation for our (published) argument that Luther's anti-Jewish polemics can be found in his writings throughout his career, that he did not experience a chance of heart in the matter, but was quite logical in his religious argumentations, for which the concept of Jews and Jewish faith served as an important piece.

Our book, *Martin Luther, the Bible and the Jewish People* was a culmination of our collaboration on Luther's exegetically oriented works.[5] We prepared that as a study tool for anyone interested in the topic with a comprehensive selection of Luther's texts pertaining to the Bible, as well as his explicitly anti-Jewish texts, with short critical introductions, annotations, and bibliography. We consider it important that inquirers on this question not believe past or present interpretations of others but rather take a first-hand look into the material and then deliberate, and hopefully, in constructive conversation with fellow inquirers.

[5] Brooks Schramm and Kirsi Stjerna (eds.), *Martin Luther, The Bible, and the Jewish People: A Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

LUTHER, THE JEWS, AND THE CHRISTIAN HEBRAISTS

Brooks Schramm

The Second "Front" in Luther's Battle Against the Jews

Thank you for the invitation to speak today and to share with you some aspects of the work that Kirsi and I have been engaged in – both together and individually – for at least a dozen years now around the topic of "Martin Luther and the Jewish People." The central thesis of the book that Kirsi and I wrote about Luther and the Jews (*Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People*) is that Luther's particular brand of antagonism toward the Jews was distinctive, in that it was a biblically based and biblically driven antagonism, much more so than it was culturally or socially driven. The overwhelming percentage of references to the Jews and Judaism in Luther's writings (and there are many, many thousands of them) occur in the context of discussions about the interpretation of concrete biblical passages, or about the Bible itself. Stated more pointedly, most – not all, but most – of Luther's polemic against the Jews is a polemic against Jewish ways of interpreting the Bible, or what Christians call the OT.

Just as an initial illustration of this claim, take a look sometime at the structure of Luther's two most well-known writings relating to the Jews: the 1523 treatise, *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew*, and the infamous 1543 treatise, *On the Jews and their Lies*. In both of these treatises, the bulk of Luther's ink is actually spilled on extended discussions of specific OT proof-texts demonstrating (from Luther's perspective) that Jesus is in fact the Messiah promised in the OT, and that this claim is incontrovertible. For Luther himself, these concrete exegetical discussions served as the foundation – the heart and soul if you will – of the treatises as such. The exegesis produces the criteria on the basis of which Luther makes his various assertions relative to matters Jewish. That is, for Luther himself, the exegesis represented the *sine qua non* (the "without which not") for the things he has to say about the Jews in these two treatises. If, however, one examines the history of the reception of these two treatises, what one tends to find is that Luther's exegetical material is for all practical purposes omitted, and the things he has to say about the Jews become free-floating

ideas unrelated to the foundation upon which he himself formulated the ideas in the first place.

But on the question of "Luther and the Jews," there was another issue going on, from Luther's perspective, that is not quite as evident or obvious from a reading of his texts as is the issue that I have just described. Luther's battle against Jewish exegesis or Jewish biblical interpretation was an overt one. Less overt, but of no less significance, I would suggest, is the fact that when it came to the question of the Jews, Luther was waging a battle on two distinct fronts. And typically it is only the first of those fronts that receives much attention. The second front, the one easily missed in the reading of his texts, was the battle he was waging against a distinct group of Christians, Christians who from his perspective were interpreting the OT as-if-they-were-Jews. From Luther's perspective, these Christians who interpret the OT as if they were Jews represented a dire, even existential threat to the gospel itself. It is about this particular group of Christians that I will speak to you today. I do so out of the conviction that any presentation on the question of "Luther and the Jews" that does not take this 'second front' seriously into account misses an absolutely crucial aspect of Luther's thought process around the question of the Jews and Judaism.[6]

Luther's Lifelong Engagement with the "OT"

Luther wrote a whole bunch about a whole bunch of things. A bunch. One shudders to think about what Luther would have done with a word processor. The massive size of the corpus of Luther's written works and its numerous literary genres can have the effect of obscuring what was at the heart of his life-work, which was his engagement with the Christian OT. Beginning with his first Psalms lectures in 1513-1515 and ending with what is really his magnum opus, the Genesis lectures of 1535-1545, Luther was constantly lecturing on, preaching on, writing commentaries and expositions on, and most especially translating and revising his translations of the OT. In spite of all of the myriad other things that Luther wrote about,

[6] On this entire issue, see Thomas Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism*, trans. Lesley Sharpe and Jeremy Noakes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 94-124.

whether willingly or unwillingly, to gain a solid grasp of who he was as a scholar, as a theologian, and as a pastor, it is essential to reckon with the fact that the OT and its "proper" interpretation represent the foundation on which Luther stood and to which he devoted an immense amount of creative energy. When seen in this light, one can also see that Luther was engaged throughout his career with what is arguably the oldest and the most persistent Christian theological problem or crux, namely, what to do with the OT, or, more specifically, what is the exact nature of the relationship between the two volumes of the Christian Bible? Luther's theology is dependent on a quite precise – and quite narrow – answer to this question (more later).

If there is anything in Luther's literary output that deserves the name "labor of love," it is without doubt his German Bible, the *Lutherbibel*. The NT took him barely three months to translate while he was on the Wartburg in early 1522, but the OT involved an entire team of translators (what Luther called his "Wittenberg Sanhedrin") and took fully a dozen years to complete (1534). The prophetic books and the book of Job turned out to be quite difficult for the team to handle and that slowed the project down significantly. But even after the OT translation was complete, Luther was never satisfied with it, and he and his team continued to revise the translations of OT books and particularly important passages in those books until the very end of his life. The *Lutherbibel* of 1534 and its subsequent revisions represents one of the greatest literary accomplishments in western history, no doubt: the books of the OT, the "Apocrypha," and the NT translated from their original languages into contemporary, idiomatic German, together with Prefaces to most of the biblical books and copious marginal annotations all designed to aid the common reader. From the 1520's until the end of Luther's life in the mid-1540's, it is worth noting that the wealthiest people in the town of Wittenberg were actually the printers, with their biggest seller and moneymaker being far and away the *Lutherbibel*. Luther, however, was always proud to say that he never received one single Pfennig for his translated Bible; it was for him a labor of love purely and simply, in service to God and to the church.

But what does all of this labor on the OT, in terms of lectures, sermons, commentaries, and, most of all, translation, have to do with the Jews? What does all of the linguistic work in Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek have to do the Jews? I would submit to you that the answer to this question is: Everything. The great Jewish scholar, Salo Baron, in his multi-volume work *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, has put it this way: "Luther's lifetime preoccupation with the OT made him, on the whole, less rather than more friendly to contemporary Jews."[7] Why was this the case? For us in our context, such a thing seems so counter-intuitive, because we are given to the notion that if we just learn more about *the other*, we will come to appreciate them more and hate them less. But Luther is an example in which things very clearly went in the opposite direction. Knowledge of *the other* does not inexorably lead to respect, even today.

Christian Hebraism

Martin Luther lived at a remarkable time in western history. He, of course, contributed in profound and lasting ways to the time in which he lived and to its legacy, but he was also a child of his time in the sense that he was influenced by certain powerful currents that were in motion, already before him. One of these currents was the movement known as Renaissance humanism and its clarion call, *ad fontes* (to the sources, i.e., back to the original languages). Renaissance humanism provoked a profound renewal of interest in classical Greek and classical Latin, and for those Christian scholars who were interested in the Bible, it also provoked the question of Hebrew in general and of the Hebrew Bible in particular. Jerome's Latin Vulgate Bible had been the official Bible of the western church for over 1,000 years. Prior to the year 1500, the study of the Hebrew language by Christians was an overwhelmingly esoteric phenomenon, a study engaged in only by a tiny number of experts. Some of these scholars were quite gifted, but they were very few in number. And apart from Jews who had converted to Christianity, any Christian who desired to learn Hebrew or Aramaic was dependent on having a Jewish teacher who was willing to teach them.

[7] Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 13: *Inquisition, Renaissance, and Reformation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) 13:220.

The movement known as *Christian Hebraism*, which was a direct descendent of Renaissance humanism, had its origins in Italy in the late fifteenth century where sociological conditions made it possible for Christians and Jews to mix in something like a "semi-neutral" manner,[8] and it was from there that it moved north into Germany. But it was really the Protestant Reformation that provided the fuel and the rationale, which turned Christian Hebraism into an identifiable, pervasive, and influential intellectual movement. In the words of Stephen Burnett of the University of Nebraska, "the Reformation turned Christian Hebraism from the pastime of a few hobbyists and theologians into a broad based intellectual movement that involved students and professors, printers, and patrons of many kinds living throughout Europe."[9] And in terms of the sociology of knowledge, the great 'sea change' that came with Christian Hebraism, with its production of grammars, and lexicons, and critical texts, was that Christians – for the first time in history! – were now able to study Jewish languages and Jewish texts apart from Jews. Hebraica had made the jump into the Christian world – a great gain for the church and a great loss for the Jewish community.

Luther was one of these early Christian Hebraists. He clearly benefitted from the movement, and, to a certain extent, he contributed to it. The OT translation in the *Lutherbibel* is, to be sure, one of the great monuments of sixteenth-century Christian Hebraism. But, as it turned out, Luther was a Christian Hebraist of a very peculiar – and narrow – type, about which I will say more in short order. Before we get there, however, first a few words about Luther and the Hebrew language.

In the early part of his scholarly career, Luther was primarily self-taught in Hebrew. He seems to have begun learning Hebrew around the year 1509 at age 26, with the aid of the Latin language Hebrew grammar and lexicon published by Johannes Reuchlin in 1506 (*de rudimentis hebraicis*), and he would continue to use Reuchlin's influential Christian Hebraist work until the end of his life. When Philipp Melanchthon, a distant relative of Reuchlin, came to Wittenberg in 1518 to teach Greek, Luther

[8] Stephen G. Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500-1660): Authors, Books, and the Transmission of Jewish Learning* (Library of the Written Word 19; The Handpress World 13; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012), 24.

[9] Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era*, 3.

learned Hebrew from him. And when Matthäus Aurogallus (Goldhahn) came to the university as Professor of Hebrew in 1521, Luther began learning Hebrew from him as well. We know that Luther had his own copy of a Hebrew Bible (Brescia, 1494) which is still extant today,[10] and he also had a personal Hebrew Psalter that he liked to take with him whenever he travelled.[11] In an idiom that we are fond of using today, we can say that Luther had a very strong "working knowledge" of biblical Hebrew, but by his own repeated admission he was nothing like an expert in the language. As he grew older he was known to say that if he were young again, he would go back and learn Hebrew properly.

But the most fundamental problem that all of the Christian Hebraists, Luther included, had to face was their realization that with the *re-discovery* of the Hebrew Bible also came the *discovery* of the Jewish interpretive tradition of that same Hebrew Bible. Stated differently, the Christian Hebraists had to come to terms with the problem of rabbinic commentary and Jewish ways of mediating the text of the Hebrew Bible. Questions such as who has the right, or even the ability, to interpret the Hebrew Bible were questions of great existential import and could not be avoided. And every Christian Hebraist had to deal with the fundamental question: how much "Jewish" interpretation is allowable in Christian commentary?

Luther did not evade these questions. In fact, he posed them directly. And his answers are quite striking. What Luther argued for, and quite forcefully, was a Hebrew Bible absolutely unfettered – or "contaminated" – by Jewish readings of the text. He was willing to grant that the rabbis could potentially provide insight into certain matters of Hebrew grammar, but on issues that touched on theological matters, and more specifically on Christological matters, rabbinic readings, Luther said, must be absolutely excluded from the Christian theological enterprise. More than anything else, this stance set Luther apart from the majority of the Christian Hebraist movement, and it would continue to set Luther-an

[10] Burnett, "Luthers Hebräische Bibel (Brescia, 1494): ihre Bedeutung für die Reformation," in *Meilensteine der Reformation*, ed. Irene Dingel and Henning P. Jürgens, (Gütersloh, 2014) 62-69.

[11] Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews*, 156.

Christian Hebraists apart from all other Christian Hebraists, really until the time of the Enlightenment, and even beyond.

Given this quite radical exclusivist position that Luther articulated, it is critical for us to note that he was never in position to handle rabbinic texts in any kind of systematic fashion for himself; his lack of command of rabbinic Hebrew and rabbinic Aramaic made this impossible. Thus Luther's engagement with this complex, weighty, and extremely broad Jewish intellectual tradition was always and only "in filtered form, mostly excerpts selected and translated by other Christian scholars."[12] There were, however, other Christian Hebraists, the overwhelming majority of which were in the Reformed, i.e., Calvinist, tradition, who *could* handle rabbinic texts *for themselves* and who could engage these texts on the texts' own terms. Luther knew who these scholars were; he knew their names; he knew their work; and he didn't like it.

Luther's combative, even overtly hostile, relationship with these other highly competent and gifted Christian Hebraists derives from his interpretive convictions, which he regarded as non-negotiable. It is to some of these convictions that we now turn, before moving to a brief examination of some of Luther's polemics against a particularly prominent and gifted Christian Hebraist.

Fundamental Interpretive Principles

I began my presentation this morning by highlighting the ancient theological problem that so animated Luther's work on the Bible, namely, the nature of the relationship between the two volumes of the Christian Bible. Christian theology prior to Luther is rich with possibilities for addressing this problem. Not all of the Christian thinkers who dealt with this problem did so overtly, but they all had to deal with it in some shape or form.

Luther, however, dealt with this question in a head-on manner, and one can find his consistent position all over the place in his writings. The passage that I have chosen to focus on in order to illustrate Luther's position comes from his first lectures on the Psalms in 1513, and it occurs

[12] Burnett, "Luther and Hebrew," in *Hebrew Between Christians and Jews* (ed. Daniel Stein Kokin; Studia Judaica 77; Berlin: de Gruyter, forthcoming 2019).

in his Preface to those lectures, where he takes up the question of how Christians are supposed to read and understand the OT. He writes the following words:

> If the OT can be interpreted by human wisdom apart from the NT, then I would say that the NT has been given for no reason. And I say this on analogy with St. Paul's claim in Gal 2, that if the law were sufficient, then "Christ died for no reason.[13]

This position that Luther states here, and from which he never backs away in the slightest, contains all of the seeds of his lifelong antagonism toward the Jews and their interpretive tradition.

If we were to conduct a poll of relatively educated and interested Christians, and if we were to ask them the question – Why should one bother studying the OT? – I'd be willing to bet that one of the most common answers would be something like: "Well, because you can't understand the NT apart from the OT." Or, "I study the OT in order better to understand the NT." These are actually quite fine answers, they make perfect sense, and they have a great deal of support in the history of Christian thought. But, they are not Luther's answers. In fact, the Luther quote that I just read to you is designed to contradict these very positions, in that he puts matters precisely the other way around. Luther's interpretive principle regarding the Christian Bible, is that the OT *cannot be understood* apart from the NT. Or, stated differently, one does not read *from* the OT *into* the NT, rather one must read the OT *through the lens of* the NT. For Luther, the OT on its own terms, is theologically impenetrable, and anyone who tries to read it on its terms, i.e., by itself, is doomed to failure.

This programmatic claim of Luther's is also closely related to a much more general hermeneutical approach that permeates the way in which he tries to understand any literary material. If you were to ask anyone who is involved on a regular basis in the task of interpreting or

[13] Preface to *Dictata Glossa* (WA 3:12,29-31; 55/1:6,26-28): "Si vetus testamentum per humanum sensum potest exponi sine nouo testamento, dicam Quod nouum testamentum gratis datum sit. Sicut arguit Apostolus, Quod 'Christus gratis sit mortuus,' si lex sufficeret." (cf LW 10:6).

trying to understand texts of any complexity, you would find interpreters of all shapes and forms sharing in a particular dynamic of moving back and forth between the individual parts of a text, on the one hand, and the text as a whole, on the other. Interpreters – just like translators – are constantly engaged in this back and forth movement. The better we grasp the individual parts of text, the better are we able to grasp the whole. And conversely, the better we grasp the whole, the better are we able to grasp the individual parts. This is what has traditionally been referred to as the hermeneutical circle: this constant back and forth movement between part and whole.

But Luther, once again, is peculiar in this regard, because he insists on privileging one of these movements above the other. For Luther, the whole *always* constrains the meaning of the parts. In Luther, and most particularly in his biblical interpretation, you do not have this *genuine* back and forth movement between part and whole, whole and part, this mutually informing – and mutually correcting – movement. Rather in Luther, the message of the whole is all-determinative, and the individual parts must yield to the interpreter's conception of the whole.

If you think about this old question of the relationship between the OT and the NT in light of Luther's insistence that the whole must contain the parts, then the consequences for Jewish interpretation become unavoidable. Because Jews do not have the NT, Jewish interpretation short-circuits before it can even get started. Since Jews do not have the whole, as a result they have no idea how the parts of the OT are even supposed to fit together. This is what Luther means when he says: "The Jews do not understand the Bible, because they do not understand its subject matter."[14] If we were to put Luther's argument into contemporary literary-critical language, we could put it this way: the Jews do not understand the OT, because they read it out of context. For Luther, only a properly trained Christian, who understands the theological claim (res; Sache) of the Christian Bible as a whole, is capable of interpreting the OT properly. Jews, on the other hand, are excluded in principle.

One last word remains to be said in this penultimate section. At the heart of Luther's project of interpreting the Bible, is a principle that he had

[14] "Judaei non intelligunt biblia, quia rem non intelligunt." (WA TR 5:212,25-26).

arrived at already by 1518, or 1519 at the latest, to the effect that individual biblical texts rightly have one and only one proper theological sense or meaning. Luther has many names for this sense of the text. He calls it variously: the *unus*, *literalis*, *legitimus*, *proprius*, *germanus* (genuine), *purus*, *simplex*, *constans sensus*.[15] Luther was not literarily naïve. He was well aware that the Bible contains many words, phrases, and sentences that are ambiguous from a strictly lexical point of view, and that a word or a phrase or a sentence is often capable of bearing more than one meaning. They are ambiguous. But Luther developed an interpretive approach that was designed to eliminate lexical ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning. He puts it this way. When you as an interpreter encounter a word, or a phrase, or a sentence that can reasonably bear more than one meaning, you *must* choose the option that is the most consistent with the meaning of the Christian Bible as a whole. In so doing, you will discover the proper meaning of the individual text. (This principle of Luther's raises all kinds of questions about the ethics of translation).

Anyone who knows even the least bit about rabbinic interpretation of Scripture knows that rabbinic interpretation revels in polyvalence, in the surfacing of tensive readings, in at least the potential of texts to generate a multiplicity of meanings. Stated differently, rabbinic interpretation simply presupposes that there is more than one relatively adequate way to read biblical texts. Luther's single-sense approach and rabbinic approaches to biblical texts are fundamentally incompatible. Luther knew that this was the case, and he went to great lengths at the end of his career to make it crystal clear to anyone who would listen. As he stated in his bitter 1543 anti-Jewish treatise, *On the Ineffable Name*: "the Jews take great delight in making all of their stuff doubtful and uncertain."[16] This statement more than any other, I would argue, highlights Luther's central problem with rabbinic interpretation.

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[15] See Siegfried Raeder, "The Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work of Martin Luther," in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*. Vol. 2: *From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (ed. Magne Sæbo; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008) 363-406 (375!).

[16] "Die Jueden haben doch lust, all jr ding zweifelhafftig und nichts gewisses zu machen." (WA 53:648,5-6).

The Expulsion of Jewish Interpretation

I want now to bring things to a head by referring to a Christian Hebraist contemporary of Luther's, a scholar who from Luther's perspective represented everything that was wrong – and threatening – about this new movement called Christian Hebraism. This scholar's name was Sebastian Münster (1489-1552). Originally a Roman Catholic priest, Münster converted to the reformed branch of the Reformation in 1529 and soon thereafter assumed the chair of Hebrew at the University of Basel. In terms of sheer linguistic mojo, Münster was clearly the most gifted of all of Luther's contemporaries when it came to the command and understanding of rabbinic texts in Hebrew and Aramaic. His most important contribution to the Christian Hebraist enterprise came in 1534 and then in a second edition in 1535; this was Münster's magnum opus, his *Biblia Hebraica Latina*. In this massive work – and it is a truly stunning piece of scholarship and an amazing accomplishment – Münster translated the entire Hebrew Bible into Latin and presented that Latin translation in parallel columns with the Hebrew text; in addition, he supplemented his translation with copious annotations in which he engaged in dialogue with most of the major Jewish interpreters from the late Middle Ages, carefully translating their exegetical comments from Hebrew into Latin. In so doing, he made a plethora of previously unknown Jewish interpretations available to educated Christian readers.

Luther became quite familiar with Münster's great work, and throughout his own lectures on Genesis (1535-1545; LW 1-8) he was constantly engaged with Münster. When you read Luther's Genesis lectures, and he states "the rabbis say this," or "the rabbis say that," more often than not Luther is drawing directly on information from Münster's annotations. Luther had great respect for Münster as a Hebrew linguist, but he grew more and more antagonistic toward him as time went on.[17] We have a Table Talk of Luther's that comes from late 1542, that is, from precisely the time when Luther was finishing his writing of *On the Jews and their Lies*, in which he speaks directly of Münster. He says:

[17] Münster by his own admission was not a theologian but rather a philologist. When he was promoted to the chair of theology in Basel in 1542, he resigned after only a year. See Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews*, 104. Luther's judgment on Münster is that he always "just sticks to grammar." (WA TR 5:220,10-11).

> Münster's Bible pleases me, but I wish he had been here and had conferred with us here. He still makes too many concessions to the rabbis, although he is also hostile to the Jews, but he doesn't take it so much to heart as I do.[18]

Luther's antagonism toward Münster would grow especially bitter, and he eventually came to the conclusion that Münster was nothing more than a Christian who interpreted the Bible as if he were a Jew and who because of his great learning threatened to open the door to Jewish readings of the OT that would eventually destroy the foundations of Christianity itself. He had to be defeated.[19]

In the following Spring of 1543, directly on the heels of *On the Jews and their Lies*, Luther would write his most visceral anti-Jewish treatise, the little-known *On the Schem Hamphoras* ("On the Ineffable Name"), and in this treatise he would formulate his position vis-à-vis Christian use of Jewish interpretations of the OT. Here he has in mind all of those Christian Hebraists who did not share his strict interpretive constraints, and though he does not mention him by name, Sebastian Münster, the greatest Christian Hebraist of the day, is directly in Luther's bullseye. Luther writes:

> For this reason, our Hebraists [i.e., the Lutheran Hebrew scholars] (I want to ask them to do so for God's sake) should be urged to take on the work of cleansing the holy ancient Bible of its Jewish filth and Judas-piss [...] On pain of losing divine grace and eternal life, it is forbidden for us Christians to believe or regard as right the scriptural interpretations and glosses of the rabbis. We are, however, permitted to read them in order to see what kind of damned devilish work they're up to, and so protect ourselves from it. For thus says Moses in Deut. 28[:28]: "God will strike you with madness, blindness, and craziness of heart." Moses did not say this about the cursed Goyim but rather about his circumcised saints, the noble blood, the princes of heaven and earth, who call themselves Israel. Hereby all of their interpretations,

[18] LW 54:445-446 (#5533); [WA TR 5:218,8-12].

[19] Kaufmann's new thesis that Münster is the actual addressee of *On the Jews and their Lies* is especially pertinent here.

> glosses, and exegesis of Scripture are damned by God himself as pure madness, blindness, and craziness. God himself regards and judges all of their labor over Scripture these past 1,500 years as not only false and lies, but also as pure blindness and a crazy, insane thing.[20]

Conclusion

Luther's legacy regarding the Jews is a difficult one, and we Lutherans in this country are only beginning to come to terms with it. But bound up with this legacy, and often underappreciated, is also Luther's battle for the OT and its "proper" Christian interpretation. Just as Luther came to advocate – and agitate – for the expulsion of the Jews of Germany, so he also *and simultaneously* argued for the expulsion of Jewish interpretive methods from the arena of Christian interpretation of the OT. The consequences for the Lutheran tradition of this latter "expulsion" are deep and complex, and we are still affected by them, even if we don't realize it.

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[20] WA 53:646,19f; 53:644,30-645,5.

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