

# **Martin Luther's Influence on the Holocaust**

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## **Introduction: Christian and Jewish Relations Today**

It shall come to pass in the end of days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established at the top of the mountains and be exalted above the hills, and the nations shall flow unto it . . . and many peoples shall go and say, "Come ye and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord to the house of the God of Jacob and He will teach us of His ways and we will walk in his paths." (Isaiah 2:2-3)

One of the great things about the human species is that we are all individuals. As individuals, we have differing views on religion and God. Without individuality, there would be no free thought and, therefore, no differing religions. Since religion is such a large part of many people's lives, tension is bound to happen between them. Christianity, for example, stemmed from Judaism; the major point where they disagree is the existence of a messiah. Christianity believes that he has already come, as the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Judaism, however, believes that the messiah has not yet made his appearance on earth and that he eventually will. The tension that these conflicting views created has been present in our world since the beginning of Christianity and the quest to heal the wounds between them still goes on to this day.

Twenty years after the Holocaust had ended, the Catholic Church took the first steps to healing Judeo-

Christian relations. In 1965, Pope John XXIII announced that Catholics were removing the phrase "perfidy Judaei", which meant "unbelieving Jews".<sup>1</sup> Progress continued in the Catholic Church that year when the Church released *Nostra Aetate*, or The Declaration on the Revelation of the Church to the non-Christian Religions. Finally, in 1969, Pope Paul IV released a statement saying, "that opportunities will be developed for the cooperation of the Church with the Jewish People in the service of common human causes."<sup>2</sup>

More recently, the other denominations of the Christian Church have made attempts at smoothing relations with Jews over. The Evangelical Lutheran Church, in 1994, began the quest to heal the injuries that still separate the two religions with a church endorsed declaration that denounces some of the ideas that the Lutheran church has fostered since its inception.

The "Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community", written by the Church Council of the ELCA speaks of statements that have existed in Christianity since Lutheranism became a reality with the writings of Martin Luther. The great reformer "proclaimed a gospel for people as we really are, bidding us to trust a

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.worldjewishcongress.org/inter-religious/catholic.cfm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.worldjewishcongress.org/inter-religious/catholic.cfm>

grace sufficient to reach our deepest shames and address the most tragic truths."<sup>3</sup> What is not understood by many Lutherans is Martin Luther was not just a writer of deeply theological pieces that brought about much change through the church, but also the author of many pieces that were considered highly offensive and inflammatory. Luther is the author of such exceedingly harmful pieces as *On the Jews and Their Lies*, which is considered one of the most hurtful pieces of anti-Judaic writings to this day.

Christianity, more importantly the Lutheran church, is forever connected to Martin Luther and his legacy. The ELCA bases itself on many of the works Martin Luther wrote in his time. However, some of his works are quite offensive, and in the Declaration, the ELCA chose to make it known that the Lutheran church does not agree with Luther's anti-Judaic writings:

In the spirit of that truth-telling, we who bear his name and heritage must with pain acknowledge also Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and the violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews. As did many of Luther's own companions in the sixteenth century, we reject this violent invective, and yet more do we express our deep and abiding sorrow over its tragic effects on subsequent generations. In concert with the Lutheran World Federation, we particularly deplore the appropriation of Luther's words by modern anti-Semites for the teaching of hatred toward Judaism or toward the Jewish people in our day.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Declaration by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, 1994  
<sup>4</sup> ELCA Declaration

This statement makes an attempt to mend the injuries that can be traced back to Martin Luther. Many Jews accepted this testimony from the Lutheran church as an apology and a big step in the eventual goal of harmony and understanding between the two religions. There remain some Jews that do not accept this as a fair statement because they do not believe that Christianity is responsible for the Holocaust.

In July of 2002, a select group of educated Jewish scholars released their own statement entitled "Dabru Emet." In this document, the Jewish faith recognizes the attempts of Catholics and Lutherans alike to show their remorse for the nearly two thousand years of mistreatment. In "Dabru Emet," it is made clear through eight points how important a positive relationship between Christians and Jews truly is. Most of the points are quite basic, citing differences between Judaism such as Jesus Christ, the Old Testament, the fact that Christians and Jews worship the same God, and that both Christians and Jews believe in the same moral principles of the Torah. Towards the end of the document, the statements that are made are the ones that are the most influencing to Christianity.

The statement on Jewish and Christian relations disputes with the declaration made by the ELCA on one main point: the effect Martin Luther's written ideas had on the

Holocaust. In the fifth point, titled *Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon*, the rabbis make it clear that too many Christians did cooperate with the Nazis, or did not protest enough, but they say that Nazism did not spring from Christianity:

But Nazism itself was not an inevitable outcome of Christianity. If the Nazi extermination of the Jews had been fully successful, it would have turned its murderous rage more directly to Christians... we encourage the continuation of recent efforts in Christian theology to repudiate unequivocally contempt of Judaism and the Jewish people. We applaud those Christians who reject this teaching of contempt, and we do not blame them for the sins committed by their ancestors.<sup>5</sup>

The writers of this piece agree that blaming Christianity for the Holocaust would not help with the problem that is circulating between the two faiths. What would help, the statement reads, is the joint effort for peace to continue between the two faiths. Jews around the world need not worry about "religious assimilation"<sup>6</sup> but be more concerned about living a life that respects Christianity as a separate religion and not an extension of Judaism.

The differences that exist between Judaism and Christianity have not just stemmed from the theological differences between the two faiths or Martin Luther's works, but from a long-standing prejudice that has existed

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<sup>5</sup> Dabru Emet, 2002

<sup>6</sup> Dabru Emet



since both of the religions began. The issue of anti-Judaism has existed since the beginning of Christianity and it affected the way that many theologians, including Martin Luther, thought about Judaism.

Martin Luther, the great reformer, lived in a time where anti-Judaism ran rampant. One important question that can be asked is how this atmosphere contributed to Luther's inflammatory writings on the Jews. Outside of that, how much did his work actually contribute to the Holocaust? Did people read it with passion and take what he says into account, or were his words just discarded? In this thesis, I plan to uncover the history of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in Luther's life, how his work on the Jews was received, and whether it helped pave the way for the acceptance of Nazi policy during the Holocaust. It is my belief that the later works of Martin Luther helped prepare the way for Germans to accept the Nazi ideology of anti-Semitism.

## **Chapter One: Luther's influence on the Nazis**

### **Section One: Luther**

Dabru Emet, the declaration by Jewish scholars, had a separate paragraph, which suggested that the blame of the Holocaust did not fall solely on the shoulders of Christianity. Jews do believe that some of the blame can be placed on their shoulders; however, they do not believe that Christians can be held completely responsible. Nazism, they say, was not a Christian phenomenon. Nazism, nonetheless, used many Christian scholars to legitimize their actions in the Holocaust. The Nazis used anyone that would help them further their ideas and make them more acceptable to the public. One of those men, described in the following quote, is one of the most recognizable theologians of his day.

Some years ago a German, who was to leave a profound imprint on human experience and institutions, who was to change the course of history and become one of its most important and well-known figures, called for extreme measures against the Jews of Europe.<sup>7</sup>

Martin Luther's work was highly influential. Works that were written by him are still being used to this day. Unfortunately, some of his works have been used incorrectly

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<sup>7</sup> Larry E. Axel, "Christian Theology and the Murder of Jews" in *Encounter* (Spring 1979) vol. 40, 129. Larry Axel teaches philosophy at Purdue University.

and for purposes that were not his intention. The Holocaust of the 1930's and 1940's took the lives of many Jews; and it was an event that could not have been done without the help of many influential people. Adolf Hitler, although a very influential person, cannot have the blame for the murder of six million Jews on him alone. The uneducated public "was virtually unaware of the long history of institutional and theological anti-Semitism, and it did not occur to them that the church and Christian theology might be of any relevance in assessing the roots of the Nazi era."<sup>8</sup> Christianity has been trying to take some of the responsibility since not long after the war ended. In 1948, the National Brethren Council of the Evangelical church stated. "What has happened...we allowed to happen in silence...We Christians helped to bring about all the injustice and suffering inflicted upon the Jews in our country."<sup>9</sup> The injustices they believe that helped can be traced back to Martin Luther. How, though, was Luther used in the Nazi policies?

Martin Luther's later writings, specifically *On the Jews and Their Lies*, carried with them a very obvious connection to the programs that would take place during the

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<sup>8</sup> Axel, 130.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Michael, "Luther, Luther Scholars, and the Jews" in *Encounter* (Autumn 1985) vol. 46, 339. Robert Michael is Professor of History at Southeastern Massachusetts University.

Holocaust four hundred years later. "Much of what the Lutherans of the Holocaust period believed and felt about Jews had its source in the writings of Martin Luther."<sup>10</sup> One of the most obvious connections that can be made between Martin Luther and the actions that the Nazis took during their programs of Jewish discrimination and murder are the nine points that he makes in *On the Jews* that were followed very closely by the Nazis before war broke out in 1939.

Many of the points that fit with the actions taken by the Nazis occurred in one night. *Kristallnacht*, or "night of broken glass", occurred on the evenings of November 9 and 10, 1938. "In all, 101 synagogues were destroyed and almost 7,500 Jewish businesses were destroyed. 26,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps, Jews were physically attacked and beaten and 91 died."<sup>11</sup> Also on this night, books that had any connection to Jews were burned, including Torah scrolls, Talmuds, prayer books, and anything that would help the rabbis teach. The actions taken by the Nazis in response to the murder of a German official, Ernst vom Rath, have many similarities to the

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<sup>10</sup> Michael, 341.

<sup>11</sup> Louis L. Snyder, Encyclopedia of the Third Reich. (New York, Paragon House, 1989) 201.

first four of the points that Martin Luther lays out in *On the Jews and Their Lies*:

First, that their synagogues be burned down, and that all who are able toss in sulphur and pitch; it would be good if someone could also throw in some hellfire.

Second, that all their books- their prayer books, their Talmudic writings, also the entire Bible- be taken from them, not leaving them one leaf, and that these be preserved for those who may be converted.

Third, that they be forbidden on pain of death to praise God, to give thanks, to pray, and to teach publicly among us and in our country.

Fourth, that they be forbidden to utter the name of God within our hearing.<sup>12</sup>

Those are not the only parallels that can be drawn between the actions of the Nazis and Luther. Over the next two or three months, the "aryanization" of the German nation began, still following closely to the recommendations that Luther had set forth long ago. In a span of several months, nine more steps to aryanization were implemented by the Nazis, among them many that are quite similar to Luther's own steps:

1. Jews were required to turn over all precious metals to the government.
2. Pensions for Jews dismissed from civil service jobs were arbitrarily reduced...
9. Laws protecting tenants were made non-applicable to Jewish tenants.<sup>13</sup>

When these legal steps are put next to Luther's suggestions, it is easy to see the comparison:

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<sup>12</sup> Luther, Martin. *On the Jews and Their Lies*. 1543 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971)

<sup>13</sup> Burleigh, Michael et.al, The Racial State: Germany, 1933-1945 (New York, Cambridge, 1991) 92-96

Fifth, I advise that safe conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews. For they have no business in our countryside, since they are not lords, officials, tradesmen or the like.

Sixth, I advise that usury be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping.<sup>14</sup>

The agreements that can be seen between Nazi policies and Luther do not stop there. The policies the Nazis implemented had one more step to follow in their original intentions, the Madagascar Plan<sup>15</sup>, which would closely follow Luther's ninth and final plan to "expel them from Germany, because they "suck the marrow from our bones."<sup>16</sup> The Germans had full intentions of ridding all of Europe of all Jews within its borders.

Luther, however, is not the only scholar whose works were used as propaganda. The Nazis did use his work directly to help legitimize what they were doing, but other forms of propaganda would be necessary. In their continuing mission to legitimize what they were about to do, the Nazis found three men who were similar ideologically, theologically and politically who would help them in justifying their actions.

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<sup>14</sup> Luther, 270

<sup>15</sup> [http://www1.yadvashem.org/about\\_holocaust/documents/part2/doc97.html](http://www1.yadvashem.org/about_holocaust/documents/part2/doc97.html)

<sup>16</sup> Michael, 343

## Section 2: Theologians under Hitler

The propaganda machine that the Nazis mastered during the Holocaust allowed them to begin to achieve their goals of the complete elimination of European Jewry. They were direct users of Luther and his works, but they also employed the help of men that were theologians themselves to help make their ideas more widely acceptable. Among these, many theologians were Gerhard Kittel and Paul Althaus.

Gerhard Kittel was born in 1888, and raised in a house that closely fit the definition of the perfect German home. His family represented the best of the German middle class, and was the son of Rudolf Kittel, a respected German scholar.<sup>17</sup> Kittel was a respected theologian himself, becoming a household name among other New Testament scholars. He, however, ended up in prison, mostly because of his association with the National Socialists, or Nazis.

Kittel led a rather normal life until the rise of the Nazi party in 1933. Until that point, he had built a name for himself as a talented theologian. He was not a German theologian that rated as high as the likes of Paul Tillich,

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<sup>17</sup> Robert P. Ericksen, Theologians Under Hitler (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985) 28

but in his element, the New Testament, he was highly recognized.

The Nazis put Kittel to good use. He became one of their leading theologians in dealing with the 'Jewish Question'. In 1933, Kittel offered four points on how Germany could deal with Jews: extermination, Zionism, assimilation, and "guest status". These four points were the findings that Kittel formulated because of his association with *Forshungsabteilung Judenfrage* (Research Section on the Jewish Question) of which Kittel was a charter member.<sup>18</sup> The Nazis took these four points into deep consideration, including the emphasis that Kittel put on certain ideas.

Kittel only believe that one of these four options were possible. That option was the theory of "guest status", which meant that Jews were to be separated from everyone that they live around who are not Jewish. Kittle rejected the other three for various reasons; oddly enough, he rejected extermination based not on principle, but on the fact that it had been tried before, only to fail.

Kittel formed his ideas on Judaism for a few different reasons. He believed that despite the Jewishness being very significant for Christianity, their dissimilarities

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<sup>18</sup> Ericksen, 29



far outweigh their similarities. Kittel calls Jews "both the chosen people and the disobedient, cursed people."<sup>19</sup> Kittel became the virulent anti-Semite that he did because of the events that took place in Germany following World War 1. Kittel's father, Rudolf, thought in much the same manner that Gerhard did. Rudolf strongly believed that Germany was violated by the Treaty of Versailles. However, unlike Gerhard, Rudolf was anchored much more deeply in his beliefs of rationalism and tolerance to those who wronged Germany following WWI. Gerhard, on the other hand, was not nearly as grounded; he quickly noticed the irrationalism, mysticism, and anti-Semitism that controlled his generation, and began to follow it. With the rise of Hitler, the rise of these groups' ideas became more likely.

The second theologian that the Nazis used was Paul Althaus, also born in 1888, who was one of the most respected Lutheran theologians in his day.<sup>20</sup> Althaus represented German Lutherans in his day; he was also most known for his study of Martin Luther. His connections with Martin Luther begin in 1926, when Althaus became the president of the Luther society and served it for more than thirty years.

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<sup>19</sup> Ericksen, 32

<sup>20</sup> Ericksen, 79

With Althaus' close study of Luther came many agreements to Luther. The biggest agreement that Althaus had with Luther was their mutual disagreement with Julius Leutheuser, one of the leading scholars with *Deutsche Christen*, who compared Jesus and Hitler saying, "the National Socialist State grew out of one, and evangelical Christianity out of the other."<sup>21</sup> Althaus and Luther are alike in their disagreement with Leutheuser, who compares Hitler directly to Jesus, making Hitler look like a messiah to Nazism as Jesus is to Christianity.<sup>22</sup> Althaus and Luther's ideas do not always match so well, however.

One of the larger and more popular works by Luther, *Zweireichlehre*, or the doctrine of two kingdoms, is a piece that Althaus uses extensively to aid the Nazi propaganda machine. In this work, Luther attempts to "reconcile the apparent difference between the gentle, loving behavior expected of the Christian,...and the sometimes harsh behavior of the state."<sup>23</sup> Through this, Luther means that man is allowed to rule by the sword, where as God rules by love. The problem that Althaus sees with this

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<sup>21</sup> Ericksen, 90-91

<sup>22</sup> MacKinnon, Donald M. "Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch" in *Religious Studies* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989) p. 247-250.

<sup>23</sup> Ericksen, 104

interpretation is that it shows man at his weakest points, "after he has fallen."<sup>24</sup>

Althaus believes that this view is much too weak for the present situation of Germany, which at the time was a nation that was struggling through reparations imposed by the Treaty of Versailles and the Weimar Republic. Althaus believed that Luther's ideas held merit, yet they needed to be changed to fit the present-day German situation better. In the end, the recommendation that Althaus gave to the Nazis was to embrace Luther's ideas with the change he offered. Althaus said that, unlike Luther, he thought the church should become involved in the matters of the state, most importantly that the church should endorse a transition from the Weimar Republic to Third Reich and National Socialism.

Althaus' fascination with Nazism stemmed from the feeling that Germany was wronged in the Treaty of Versailles much the same as Kittel believed. His joining with the Nazi party, as Ericksen believes it to be, was not entirely because he agreed with Nazi politics, but because he felt that Germany, to return to greatness, needed a strong leader, and Hitler was that man in Althaus' eyes. Althaus' biggest fear was that the church would be left

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<sup>24</sup> Ericksen, 104

behind because of Hitler's negative views on Judaism. With his great amounts of knowledge of Luther, Althaus became a powerful theological ally to the Nazi party.

The third highly recognized man that the Nazis sought help from was the theologian Emanuel Hirsch. He is tied closely to the other men for a couple reasons. Like both Kittel and Althaus, Hirsch supported National Socialism. Similar to Althaus, he followed Luther closely, and felt that Luther's theology could be applied to modern times, especially the difficult times that Germany was experiencing early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unlike the other two men, Hirsch was a radical. "Radicalism denotes his character as much as moderation denotes Althaus'."<sup>25</sup> Hirsch was also considered more of an intellectual than was either Kittel or Althaus; Hirsch tended to draw on his intellect and heritage while Kittel and Althaus were much more conservative and fearful at times.

Hirsch, became involved with the Nazi party for a couple of reasons; first, the power that the Nazi party exhibited drew him in, because Hirsch was very conflicted about the hardships that the Treaty of Versailles had brought upon Germany. Second, Hirsch was unable to serve the German Army during WWI, because he was deemed as

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<sup>25</sup> Ericksen, 120

"physically unfit".<sup>26</sup> The Army did not even let him serve as a pastor in the field, mostly because of his poor eyesight (Hirsch was nearly blind his entire life, eventually becoming blind in his later years). Hirsch was very upset that he could not fight the battles that his German brothers had, and because of this, he felt he needed to take a very prominent stand on regaining German pride. Hirsch felt that the only way he could do this would be to follow a powerful party into a new Germany that would return his country to greatness. Hirsch brought the Nazi party a devotee that was extremely nationalist politically, devoutly Lutheran religiously, and extremely rational intellectually.

With the influence of these three men, all of them sharing the best similarities and having complementing differences, the Nazi party now had what they needed to become a national power that had influential thinkers that the whole of Germany could identify with.

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<sup>26</sup> Ericksen, 127

## Chapter 2: Luther's Thoughts on the Jews

### Section 1: Luther

Martin Luther is one of the most influential Christian theologians that ever existed. His works began the Reformation, which eventually led to a new denomination of Christianity called Lutheranism. Often left out when studying Luther is the fact he wrote treatises that could be considered at the very least inflammatory. One of the most offensive in that collection is his treatise written in 1543 entitled *On the Jews and Their Lies*. To completely understand what is said in that piece, one must understand Luther's surroundings first.

As a scholar in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Luther was surrounded by feelings of deep hatred towards the Jewish faith, which is also known as anti-Judaism. Luther, however, did not originally follow this trend. His life went through three stages, according to Franklin Sherman, a respected theologian. The steps were as follows:

- (a) an early Luther deeply immersed in the animus towards Jews and Judaism that had been characteristic of Christian preaching and teaching...
- (b) a middle Luther, who is lifted out that medieval morass by the power of the Gospel...
- (c) Luther only to fall back once again in his late writings.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Franklin Sherman, "Steps Along the Way," in *Faith Transformed* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 65.

In other words, Luther began his theology with animosity towards Jews, mostly attributed to his surrounding theologians, and switched his ideas to be more accommodating to Judaism in the middle years of his life, only to revert to common Christian teaching practices of anti-Judaism.

Today, feelings of hatred towards Jews are often categorized as anti-Semitism, or the hatred of Jews as a race. The Holocaust made anti-Semitism, a term that was not well known before, a well-known term. The Holocaust was an event that touched the lives of millions of people around the world. It continues to touch the lives of people today because of the images and memories that it has left behind. Luther, however, cannot be called an anti-Semite by definition, because anti-Semitism did not exist until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, according to Sherman.<sup>28</sup> That statement does not mean the things Luther wrote can be forgotten, because that would be worse than the writing itself. However, Luther's writings clearly portray anti-Semitic views according to today's definition. Sherman shows his point of Luther's anti-Semitic views well in an excerpt of his essay. In it, he writes:

neither can it be maintained that Luther's writings against the Jews are merely a set of

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<sup>28</sup> Sherman, "Steps Along the Way", 63

cool, calm, and collected theological judgments. His writings are full of rage, and indeed hatred...not just a religious point of view; it is against that group that his action proposals are directed.<sup>29</sup>

Luther's work appears and reads as very anti-Semitic. Because he writes against an "identifiable human group"<sup>30</sup>, readers often believe that what Luther wrote was against the Jews as a race, which is known as anti-Semitism. Rather, Luther is characterized as an anti-Judaic writer, which is someone who is against the Jews as a faith, not as a people. Luther's writings can only be connected to anti-Semitism through their uses long after he had died. Luther disliked the Jewish faith, not the Jewish people.

*On the Jews and Their Lies* is a very controversial theological piece, but the question is how do we explain it? What is the significance of Jews? It is a question that many theologians have attempted to answer, most notably Franklin Sherman and Mark Edwards.

The largest significance of *On the Jews and Their Lies* is it was written by one of the most influential theologians of all time. Luther's résumé speaks for itself: by the time he was forty-seven years old, he had posted his Ninety-Five Theses, published the Augsburg Confession, and been excommunicated by the Roman Catholic

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<sup>29</sup> Sherman, "Steps Along the Way", 63

<sup>30</sup> Sherman, "Steps Along the Way", 63



Church.<sup>31</sup> Luther had experienced more than most theologians and he lived for sixteen more years. As Luther aged, his former feelings of acceptance and understanding towards Jews faded and were replaced with very negative ones. When *Jews* was written, one of Luther's closest friends, Melanchthon, tried to stop the treatise from being published and released. The amount of anger that was raised by his work was so great the churches of Zurich issued the following statement, saying that Luther's work had no justification, "if it had been written by a swineherd, rather than a celebrated shepherd of souls, it might have some- but very little- justification."<sup>32</sup> The question that still surrounds this topic is why did Luther write such abusive remarks?

There are several theories as to why Luther's feelings towards Jews turned so rapidly. In the middle part of his life, as has been previously mentioned, Luther had a very accepting view on Jews. One of his earlier writings, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, published in 1523, is considered a pioneering step in Jewish-Christian dialogue. In this piece, Luther says that we must be cordial, accepting, and helpful:

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<sup>31</sup> Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther's Last Battles* (London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>32</sup> Sherman, *Luther's Works*, 123

If we really want to help them, we must be guided in our dealings with them not by papal law but by the law of Christian love. We must receive them cordially, and permit them to trade and work with us, that they may have...the opportunity to...hear our Christian teaching, and witness our Christian life.<sup>33</sup>

Sherman says on page 65 of his essay that the reasons that Luther's views changed so rapidly was a conglomeration of a few things, the most notable factors being the "re-Judaizing" among some Christians, unhappy encounters with rabbis, and the Jew's refusal to convert. Sherman argues the point that what Luther wrote was a conscious decision because of extreme hatred of Jews. Other theologians, like Mark Edwards, attribute Luther's change in heart to something very different.

"His generally poor health, and especially probably arteriosclerosis, with its unusual circulation impairment, raises the question of possible senility or at least of reduced intellectual activity in his later years."<sup>34</sup> Edwards, much unlike Sherman, contends that Luther's work is the product of a lifetime of illness that slowly worked away at his overall health and eventually his mental capacities.

The feelings that Luther had toward the Jews were not ones that were new to anyone. Luther's own feelings on the

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<sup>33</sup> Sherman, "Steps Along the Way", 64

<sup>34</sup> Edwards, 10

Jews were part of a long history of theologians who said very offensive things about the Jews.

## **Section 2. Luther's Surrounding Theologians**

The comments that Martin Luther wrote in some of his works, which are anti-Judaic, were distasteful, discriminative, and quite common in his time. There were many theologians of his time that disagreed with him, including one of his closest friends, Melanchthon. However, there were many who did not disagree. Many of the theologians did not write statements that were quite as blunt, but anti-Judaic writings were not uncommon during the Luther-era. The largest difference between Luther's work and the work of others is that Luther is a highly respected and widely known theologian, more so than many of the other theologians of his time. Luther, as mentioned earlier, planted the seeds of Lutheranism with his work, while other theologians of his time have no long-lasting legacy to their names. Luther, however, was not the first one to write about anti-Judaism.

Martin Luther is in line of a long string of anti-Judaic writings. There are many other sources around the world that express feelings of anti-Judaism.

Robert Michael is a theologian who has written many things about Luther's influence on other theologians. He makes several good points about Luther's history as well.

Luther, Michael says, "followed the path laid out for him over the past 1500 years by Church Fathers John Chrysostom and Augustine, Jerome and Aquinas..."<sup>35</sup>

It can also not be forgotten that anti-Judaism, the precursor for anti-Semitism, was not just a Lutheran phenomenon. Lutheranism certainly helped the popularity of it, but they were not the first. Christianity in general holds much of the responsibility for anti-Judaism. Gordon Rupp, a Luther theologian, says, "Luther is a small chapter in the large volume of Christian inhumanities toward the Jewish people."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Michael, "Luther, Luther Scholars, and the Jews" in *Encounter* (Autumn 1985) vol. 46, 342.

<sup>36</sup> Michael, 347

### **Chapter 3: Interpretations of Luther**

#### **Section 1: Different Views on Luther**

In the four centuries that separate Luther and the Holocaust, there existed many different ways that scholars and the public interpreted what Luther had written during his lifetime. When it is carefully looked at, three main views are held on the work that Luther did later on in his life. First, many believe, like Franklin Sherman, that what Luther wrote during his lifetime was not at all out of the ordinary, and was common during his time to be as anti-Judaic as he was. Others, such as Mark Edwards, believe that what Luther wrote was out of the ordinary and very uncommon for him. Then, there are the people who believe Luther's later works should not even be recognized. Philipp Melanchthon, the right-hand man of Luther throughout his life, made attempts at hiding works such as *On the Jews and Their Lies*. To fully understand these views, one must understand the main figures behind these views.

## Section 2: Franklin Sherman

Franklin Sherman argues the point that what Luther wrote was a conscious decision because of extreme hatred of Jews, which was not far from the rest of the world during his time. The fact that Martin Luther had written such statements on Judaism is not common knowledge among most people; it is, however, a known fact among scholars that Luther wrote things that are considered highly inflammatory. What Luther wrote, however, was not the first of its kind. During and before his time, there were many other theologians who wrote similar things, and many world leaders whose beliefs were similar.

The first of these was John Chrysostom. A highly respected man of the ancient church, Chrysostom was "the most virulent of anti-Jewish spokesmen in the ancient church."<sup>37</sup> Chrysostom preached many anti-Jewish sermons during his time, and in the year 387, some of his most anti-Judaic sermons were read. James Parkes, a Lutheran historian, says this about Chrysostom's sermons of 387:

In these discourses, there is no sneer too mean, no gibe too bitter for him to fling at the Jewish people. No text is too remote to be able to be twisted to their confusion, no argument is too casuistical, no argument too startling for him to employ...<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Franklin Sherman, *Luther's Works*, vol. 47, *The Christian in Society IV* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971), 128.

<sup>38</sup> Franklin Sherman, *Luther's Works*, 128

The times that Chrysostom lived in and the times that followed him are known as the Jewish "dark ages," where anti-Judaism ran rampant and conversion was pushed, and sometimes forced. The First Crusade in 1096, which was originally started to combat Muslims soon turned and became a fight against the "infidel at home," which in turn began a series of fights against Judaism.<sup>39</sup> The persecution climaxed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, after they had been expelled in most of Europe. In 1492 Ferdinand and Isabella expelled Jews; the Inquisition expelled Marranos (a new faith formed by forcibly converted Spanish Jews); 1290 saw the expulsion of Jews from England; and 1394 Jews were run out of France.<sup>40</sup>

"Suffice it to say that Luther lived in an atmosphere surcharged with anti-Judaism. Moreover, he had specific models on which to draw when composing his own anti-Jewish tracts."<sup>41</sup> The ancient times of the Christian church were not the only ones that saw many of their most influential theologians write negative pieces on Judaism. In Luther's time, two other very influential men wrote similar works that were precursors to his own work. The first of these

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<sup>39</sup> Franklin Sherman, *Luther's Works*, 128

<sup>40</sup> Franklin Sherman, *Luther's Works*, 128

<sup>41</sup> Franklin Sherman, *Luther's Works*, 129



men was Martin Bucer, with the second being a man that had many disagreements with Luther, John Eck.

Bucer published a treatise that was even similarly titled as Luther. His *On the Jews*, written in 1539, was not quite as inflammatory as Luther was, but its tract was quite similar to that of Luther. In it, he said:

No new synagogues were to be built. The Jews were to refrain from "insulting" Christianity, and were to be compelled to attend Christian sermons. They were to abjure whatever the Talmud had added to the Scriptures, to be barred from all business activity, and to assigned menial tasks.<sup>42</sup>

Eck followed similar lines. Just two years after Bucer's work, Eck wrote *Refutation of a Jew-Book*, which called for much more harsh anti-Jewish laws. What makes the similarities between Eck and Luther so interesting is that they are two of the most passionate enemies when it came to most of their work. Heinrich Graetz said, "These two passionate opponents were of one heart and soul in their hatred of Jews."<sup>43</sup>

Christian theologians were not the only ones writing anti-Jewish pieces. Jewish converts were also writing anti-Judaic pieces. Former rabbi Victor of Carben wrote *On the Life and Customs of the Jews*, while Anthony Margaritha, a recent convert, wrote a piece entitled *The Whole Jewish*

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<sup>42</sup> Franklin Sherman, *Luther's Works*, 129

<sup>43</sup> Franklin Sherman, *Luther's Works*, 129

*Faith*, which eventually resulted in Magaritha's expulsion from Augsburg.

From Sherman's perspective, it seems as if Luther was not the only man who was writing anti-Judaic pieces. In fact, the tracks that Luther followed through a portion of his life were laid long before he ever became the influential theologian that he is today. Other present theologians, however, argue this point, saying that Luther is an anomaly, a theologian who strayed from thinkers of his day for various reasons.

Sherman is not the only theologian that believes Luther's later works were skewed from his earlier ones; Wilhelm Mauer also understands Luther this way. Mauer says these four theological principles remained constant with Luther from his first work in 1513 to his last in 1546:

- 1) that the Jews were a people suffering under the wrath of God;
- 2) that without divine intervention they were incorrigible and impossible to convert by human effort;
- 3) that their religion remained perpetually hostile to Christianity and they could not cease from blaspheming God and Christ;
- 4) there existed a "solidarity of guilt" between Christians and Jews: a common suffering...<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>

Edwards, 138

### Section 3: Mark Edwards

Edwards, much unlike Sherman, contends that Luther's work is the product of a lifetime of illness that slowly worked away at his overall health and eventually his mental capacities.

Edwards argues that the material that Luther worked on late in his life was a far step off the path from where he had spent a large portion of his life. He attributes the sudden change to a string of severe medical issues that, on a couple occasions, nearly took his life. His worst stretch of health was from 1531 to 1546; this fifteen-year bout with sickness ranged from uric acid stones to a recurring middle-ear infection to heart problems. The latter of these problems eventually led to his death in 1546.<sup>45</sup>

Before his string of anti-Jewish writings, Luther had released only one other piece that had anything to do with Judaism. *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*, published in 1523, was a work where Luther actually spars with Christianity, saying:

For they have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs and not men. They were able to do nothing but curse them and take their goods. When they were baptized, no Christian teaching or life was demonstrated to them, rather they

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<sup>45</sup> Edwards, 9

were only subjected to papistry and monkery. When they then saw that Judaism had such strong scriptural support and that Christianity was nothing but twaddle without any scriptural support, how could they quiet their hearts and become true good Christians? I myself have heard from pious baptized Jews that if they had not in our time heard the gospel, they would have remained life-long Jews under their Christian exterior. For they confess that they never yet have heard anything about Christ from their baptizers and masters.<sup>46</sup>

Luther still hoped, at this point in his life, that the Jews, if shown compassion and mercy, would see the error of their ways and make the conversion to Christianity.

From 1523 until 1538, Luther had little to say about Judaism. He spent more of his time being a missionary, trying to bring more people to Christianity, including Jews. In 1536, after 13 years of trying to get Jews to convert with little success, Luther began to turn cold towards the Jews. Elector Johann Friedrich issued a decree in 1536 that forbade Jews to settle or do business in the Electoral Saxony. Luther did not publicly agree with this statement, but he did not fight for the Jews either, and his turn towards anti-Judaism seemed all too evident.<sup>47</sup>

In 1538, seven years into his constant bout with uric-acid stones, Luther wrote his first major attack on Jews, *Against the Sabbatarians*. This work goes into detail on

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<sup>46</sup> Edwards, 121

<sup>47</sup> Edwards, 125

how the Jews are a stubborn religion and refuse conversion, but still is a rather timid document.

In 1543, Luther's assault on Judaism peaked to its worst. Three treatises were published this year; *On the Jews and Their Lies*, *On the Ineffable Name and on Christ's Lineage*, and *On the Last Words of David*. These three works, all easily tied to each other, seemed to be the product of years of frustration and years of health problems, that surrounded Luther. Still, Edwards believes that Luther was not as virulent an anti-Semite as some believe, but that his frustration over his health and the lack of Judaism to change drove him to write what he did.

#### Section 4: Philipp Melanchthon

Philipp Melanchthon, Luther's confidant, has the most interesting type of interpretation. Melanchthon prefers not to interpret it at all. What Melanchthon hoped, however, did not achieve, was that interpretation would not be a question. Melanchthon and Andreas Osiander, two of Luther's most vigilant followers during the reformation, disagreed so much with its severity<sup>48</sup> that they planned to hide its existence. This idea had no merit, and very little backing. These two men are not the only ones that struggled with the question of letting Luther's later works be published. In fact, over four hundred years later, publishers in modern times wrestled the same questions.

Sherman says in his essay "Steps along the Way" that publishing Luther's treatise was in dispute because of the feelings that it might evoke on Jews and Christians alike. When Sherman began publishing Luther's works, many of the pieces that were considered very offensive were nearly left out of the publications. In the end, however, it was deemed necessary to publish them because of their historical significance. Publishing Jews helps theologians today understand what the world was like in the times of Martin Luther.

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<sup>48</sup> Franklin Sherman, *Luther's Works*, 123

The major argument that existed was if misuse of Luther would happen if his later works were published. On *the Jews and Their Lies*, Sherman says, was finally included in the final volumes "only to make available the necessary documents for scholarly study of this aspect of Luther's thought."<sup>49</sup> The fear that scholars had was that the statements made in *Jews* would only make the rift between Jewish and Christian relations worse. Sherman notes that this issue was overcome, because it became known soon after the debate that the worst parts of *Jews* was already in print and had been used by groups such as the KKK. The hope was that the complete release of this controversial work would encourage scholarship and reduce the amount of misuse of Luther's work.

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<sup>49</sup> Franklin Sherman, *Luther's Works*, 123

## **Section 5: My Beliefs**

When looking back at the research done for this past chapter, I find myself drawn to all three of the positions that have been taken.

I agree with Sherman, because in-depth research shows that Luther was not the only man to be writing such negative comments about the Jews. Christianity stemmed from Judaism, and the conflicts that exist between the two are a result of theological differences and the surroundings that have helped feed these negative feelings.

Edwards' ideas are intriguing because frustration can be a powerful thing. Combine the frustration of self-inflicted failure with severe medical problems, and it is easy to see and understand why Edwards believes Luther wrote his anti-Judaic writings because of years of built-up misunderstandings and anger.

Melanchthon is also intriguing, because the thought of hiding what an influential theologian wrote matches well with today's society. If a well-known public figure today said or wrote things this offensive, the attention they would get for the one negative document would easily outweigh year of accomplishment.

Overall, I believe that Sherman's idea is the best one to follow. As much as frustration, anger, and loneliness



can cause problems, it cannot be overlooked that Luther was surrounded by anti-Judaism, and it cannot be debated that he was affected by their influence.

**Conclusion: Was there misinterpretation of Luther by the Nazis?**

The magnitude of the Holocaust cannot be measured by one thesis. Scholars to this day are still asking the questions of why and how genocide could be so widely accepted throughout the world. It is a question that will most likely not ever be answered. Clues are the only connection to the Holocaust that we can find. Martin Luther is one of those clues. As this thesis has pointed out, there is a connection between Martin Luther and the events that occurred, however strange.

Whether or not action was intended, the pieces written by Martin Luther were used by the Nazis to further their ideas and planned actions. Luther wrote what he did because of his surroundings and his lack of patience to a faith that he felt he had granted enough. Luther said early in his life that the Catholic Church had been foolish:

Our fools, the popes, the bishops, sophists, and monks- the crude asses' heads- have hitherto so treated the Jews that anyone who wished to be a good Christian would almost have had to become a Jew. If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Sherman, *Luther's Works*, 124

Luther strongly believed early in his life that the Jews should have been embraced by the Christian faith, because he believed the Jews were our close neighbors. "We are aliens and in-laws; they are blood relatives, cousins, and brothers of our Lord."<sup>51</sup>

What Luther wrote was not to be understood as a course of action, but a statement on Judaism. He made references to a 'final solution' much like the Nazis, however, his was of expulsion, not extermination. Luther's works were not put into action in his time. His writings did change how people viewed the Jews, but they did not begin to act out on them. "The immediate effect of Luther's proposals thus was small; it remained for a later century to refine and systematize and apply them on a massive scale."<sup>52</sup>

Four centuries after Luther wrote *On the Jews and Their Lies*, his work became a piece to a large puzzle through the Nazi propaganda machine. The Nazis used anything they could to help their own motives. As one can see from the previous parts of this thesis, they used many people in helping push their goal of Jewish elimination. Luther was just one of them they used. It cannot be known if Luther wanted action, but in no way did he want

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<sup>51</sup> Sherman, *Luther's Works*, 124

<sup>52</sup> Sherman, *Luther's Works*, 136

extermination of Judaism. Luther searched for understanding, conversion, and at the very worst, expulsion. The Nazis had no questions of understanding or conversion. First was expulsion, and when that course of action became too difficult, murder was the option. It is sad to say, but Luther is connected to the Holocaust. His works were taken out of context, and by what can be best called an eerie coincidence, Luther's words can be tied to the most massive genocide in world history.

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