

In Defence of Luther and His Much Maligned Book, *On the Jews and Their Lies*

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This paper defends Martin Luther from charges of antisemitism that have been made against him, especially arising from his book, *On the Jews and Their Lies*. I will structure my defence around the charges brought by Franklin Sherman in his introduction to *On the Jews*, contained in volume 47 of the Concordia Publishing House series *Luther's Works*.¹ Sherman was editor of *On the Jews*, and he extensively revised the original English translation.² In his introduction, he brought the worst possible accusations of superstition, hatred, and bigotry against Luther, and completely condemned his book.

I want to show that Luther was not anti-Semitic, but considered the Jewish people by the same standards as he applied to others. To be sure, the circumstances of the Jews were (and are) different from others. They have a unique history, which calls for unique considerations. Chiefly, they were the nation chosen by God for the revelation of his law and prophecies of the coming Messiah. They were also, as the prophets foretold, the nation that rejected and crucified the Messiah, and they have endured many sufferings over the centuries since then. However, Luther was not motivated by hatred or bigotry toward them; we will see that he prayed for them. His considerations and concerns flowed over all people indifferently as required by circumstance and guided by God's word, and he was only motivated by his love for Christ and for God's word. He deserves a thoughtful defence – even though the world will not understand, because it does not share his love.



Title page, 1543 edition of *On the Jews and Their Lies* by Martin Luther

Overview: Luther's book and the spiritual exile of the Jews

The "lies" that Luther addressed in his book *On the Jews and Their Lies* were about Scripture and prophecy, history, Jewish claims to be God's people based on ethnicity and circumcision, and what Luther called "lies against persons." The latter were lies against Jesus, Mary, Christians, and Gentiles – "such as," said Luther, "the devil resorts to when he cannot assail the doctrine ... maligning, cursing, and ranting" (p254). He wrote his book at the request of a friend to refute rabbinic doctrine and to warn Christians about certain practices then common in Jewish synagogues and homes. He did not fashion his words to reach or to appease the Jews. He said that previously, when he had argued about the Scriptures with them, it was out of concern for their welfare (p178), but experience had taught him that such argument was in vain and best avoided. Now he was writing solely for Christians, and he evidently believed the circumstances called for strong warnings.

People take offence at Luther's strong language. The statement below, the very first paragraph in his book, was posted on the web to (as it was believed) prove his antisemitism:

I had made up my mind to write no more either about the Jews or against them. But since I learned that these miserable and accursed people do not cease to lure to themselves even us, that is, the Christians, I have published this little book so that I might be found among those who opposed such poisonous activities of the Jews, and who warned the Christians to be on their guard against them. I would not have believed that a Christian could be duped by the Jews into taking their exile and wretchedness upon himself. However, the devil is the god of the world, and wherever God's word is absent he has an easy task, not only with the weak but also with the strong. May God help us. Amen. (p137)

Strong language and straight talk, yes; but insightful, and not false. People who are seduced or deceived by the anti-Christian teachings of the Jews will join them in their spiritual "exile," as it were. Their denial of Christ is assuredly of the devil, though they would be greatly offended by this statement and consider it bigoted. But Jesus himself condemned the Jewish scribes and rabbis as sons of the devil (Joh. 8:44). Indeed, he offended them with lesser words than that (M't. 15:12). Later in his book, Luther wrote that he had observed how, once a person is "lured" or "duped" by false doctrine, a descent into spiritual blindness and darkness may follow swiftly. He wanted to arm people against this danger and warn them to avoid rabbinic and Jewish teaching. (Luther's warning is timely today also; in many areas Christians have Judaized and fallen away. Would that he were here to write against the modern seductions!³)

In his book, Luther gave a fascinating and learned review of history, especially events of the first century after Christ, alongside an examination of messianic prophecies in the Scripture. He clearly showed how the rabbinic interpretations of history and Scripture do not add up, and I learned a lot about the prophecies of Daniel 9 (p247f).

In addition to the rabbis' false interpretations of prophecy, Luther was incensed by certain grievous practices that were then commonplace in the Jewish synagogues in Germany. It may shock readers, as it shocked me, to learn that these practices included regular Sabbath

prayers where the people cursed Christ, Mary, and all Christians. They also prayed for the harm, death, or conquest of the Gentiles so that the Jewish nation could advance in power and dominion in the world. Luther followed his description of these practices with his advice to the authorities about how to deal with the situation. It is this advice, which advocated strong measures, that has in particular caused people to accuse him of fomenting Hitler's evil against the Jews. (I give details on all this later.)

Admittedly, Luther's language in this section of his book was in places unpleasant and inflammatory. Further, his arguments would have been stronger if he had toned it down. But, on the other hand, we should be inflamed about the things he described. He was sorely provoked; he had only recently learned about some of the most troubling practices of the Jews, and they were worse than unpleasant and inflammatory. It is not right to condemn his words but overlook the terrible problems he addressed – or if we, through naïveté or our own prejudice, prefer to remain ignorant of those problems. Further, Luther did not have the modern tools we have to edit and refine his words (if he had so wished), nor did he live in such a delicate age as we do: strong, unpleasant language was common in 16-century literature.⁴ The theory that illness or medication contributed to his irascibility is possible – I recall him lamenting in one of his later works that he was too often angry – but it ignores the gravity of the problems he was addressing.

We have seen how Luther began his book; let us see also the words he wrote as he neared the end. After discussing the history of the Jews, their method of twisting the Scriptures, their spiritual blindness, and the problems in the synagogues, he mourned:

The wrath of God has overtaken them. I am loathe to think of this, and it has not been a pleasant task for me to write this book, being obliged to resort now to anger, now to satire, in order to avert my eyes from the terrible picture which they present. It has pained me to mention their horrible blasphemy concerning our Lord and his dear mother, which we Christians are grieved to hear. I can well understand what Saint Paul means in Romans 10 when he says that he is saddened as he considers them. I think that every Christian experiences this when he reflects seriously, not on the temporal misfortunes and exile which the Jews bemoan, but on the fact that they are condemned to blaspheme, curse, and vilify God himself and all that is God's, for their eternal damnation, and that they refuse to hear and acknowledge this, but regard all of their doings as zeal for God.

Oh God, heavenly Father, relent and let your wrath over them be sufficient and come to an end, for the sake of your dear Son. Amen. (p291-92)

Thus Luther's heart and prayer for the Jews in their spiritual exile – which exile is, after all, a matter of much greater moment than their worldly exile.

All things considered, *On the Jews and Their Lies* was an impressive work, written when Luther was mature in experience and understanding. He showed clearly how the rabbinic interpretations of Daniel 9, as well as of Genesis 49 about the scepter departing from Judah (p178f), must be false considering the Scriptures and history. It behoved him to write this book because, as a Reformer of influence, he could reach many Christians.

How Franklin Sherman condemned Luther

However, Franklin Sherman had nothing good to say about Luther or his work. In his introduction he attacked Luther's character, knowledge, and "abusive" language, along with his supposed gullibility, stereotypes, and "negative attitude." Openly or by chilling innuendo he advanced odious accusations, including that Luther had an "immense capacity for hatred," was a prototype for Hitler and his "final solution," was influenced by medieval superstitions about the Jews (as if he had no discernment), and was borne along by private interpretations and his personality (as if his theology was unsound) (p123f).

In both his introduction and notes, Sherman repeatedly referred readers to secular and even Jewish sources – the very sort Luther warned against – not only to undermine or refute Luther, but also to smear him as a "tyrannical" anti-Semite (p135). However, Sherman discredited the works of converted Jews whom Luther relied on, such as Anthony Margaritha, a former rabbi, who exposed the secret practices of the Jews in their synagogues (and whom we will see again later). He also discredited the Church fathers John Chrysostom and Justin Martyr as anti-Semitic – Chrysostom as "virulently" so (p128). In fact, there were few, if any, referrals to Christian sources in Sherman's introduction or notes except to compare Luther to a "swineherd" (p123) and a Roman Catholic (p129). The more I saw, the more I wondered if Sherman was actually a German Jew, but it appears he was associated with Lutheran seminaries and was an ecumenist heavily involved in so-called interfaith dialogue.⁵

Sherman did not frankly declare his theology, but we will see that he accepted many Jewish interpretations of Scripture – again, those such as Luther warned against. Also, lacking a true appreciation of Satan's power, influence, and immediacy, he characterized Luther as having "vivid" – that is, exaggerated if not false – mental pictures of the devil (p131). What was also disturbing to me was that he neither clearly acknowledged nor clearly denied Luther's reports of the practices of the Jews in their synagogues; instead, he minimized and befogged them by qualification or innuendo. Further, he spoke not a single critical word about the Jewish cursings or violent prayers, but vaguely downplayed them.

However, in one thing Sherman was clear: his total condemnation of Luther, concerning whom he found many critical words to speak. He said the only reason Concordia House published *On the Jews* was to make it available for the "scholarly study of Luther's thought" and to expose it "to modern critical judgment" (p123). He added, "It is hoped that publication of the present treatise, unpleasant as its contents are, will contribute to greater candour concerning the role which Christians have played in this dark story" (p132-33). The "dark story" he was referring to was Nazism and the terrible suffering of the Jews in the 20th century. Sherman blamed "Luther's thought" for playing "so fateful a role in the development of antisemitism in Western culture" (p123), as if it were not the devil, but Luther – about whom Sherman had some vivid ideas of his own – who helped to foment Naziism

The admission that the publication of Luther's book was intended to expose it and Luther to criticism and censure made me wonder if Sherman slanted the translation to make

Luther look as bad as possible.⁶ For example, where he translated Luther as speaking of Christians “duped” by the Jews (see the quotation at p2 above), would the word “deceived” not have served as well? Did Sherman capture Luther’s tone truly? In any case, if we believe Sherman, by the time we have finished reading his introduction we will not want to read the horrible book of such a swineherd as Luther – unless we are only interested in the scholarly frippery of analysing his “thought” and “influences.” No wonder Luther once prayed, “Lord, keep the academics far away from us Christians.”

The definition of antisemitism; Luther opposed to ethnocentric prejudice

The Oxford English Dictionary defines antisemitism as *prejudice, hostility, or discrimination towards Jewish people on religious, cultural, or ethnic grounds*. Despite appearances, this does not describe Luther’s treatment of the Jews. Of course, his quarrels with them inevitably touched on religious questions, but they were not rooted in prejudice as the world imagines. Luther considered people indifferently according to how they received or rejected God’s word – which is also the thing that divides us in the eyes of the Lord (Luke 12:51) – and based on their treatment of their fellow man.

As to discrimination on ethnic grounds, the fact is that Luther condemned any form of ethnocentric prejudice. This Sherman overlooked, just as he overlooked every truly material fact. Indeed, Luther vehemently opposed the ethnocentrism of the Jews, who claimed divine favour on account of their race and lineage. He explained that, weekly in their synagogues and daily around their dinner tables, they followed religious liturgy that called for them to praise and thank God that they were born Jews, not Gentiles. Luther called this carnal and arrogant, and said that such ethnocentric pride is contrary to God’s love and law. He also objected to the prayers of the men, who praised God that they were not born as women. To disdain others on account of their natural attributes is to blaspheme God’s creation:

God has to endure that, in their synagogues, their prayers, songs, doctrines, and their whole life, they come and stand before him and plague him grievously (if I may speak of God in such a human fashion). Thus he must listen to their boasts and their praises to him for setting them apart from the Gentiles, for letting them be descended from the holy patriarchs, and for selecting them to be his holy and peculiar people, etc. And there is no limit and no end to this boasting about their descent and their physical birth from the fathers.

And to fill the measure of their raving, mad, and stupid folly, they boast and they thank God, in the first place because they were created as human beings and not as animals; in the second place because they are Israelites and not Goyim [Gentiles]; in the third place because they were created as males and not as females....

They have portrayed their Messiah to themselves as one who would strengthen and increase such carnal and arrogant error regarding nobility of blood and lineage. That is the same as saying that he should assist them in blaspheming God and in viewing his creatures with disdain, including the women, who are also human beings and the image of God as well as we; moreover, they are our own flesh and blood, such as

mother, sister, daughter, housewives, etc. For in accordance with the aforementioned threefold song of praise, they do not hold Sarah (as a woman) to be as noble as Abraham (as a man)... But enough of this tomfoolery and trickery. (p140-42)

Luther insisted that both Gentiles and Jews “partake of one birth, one flesh and blood [and...] neither one can reproach or upbraid the other about some peculiarity without implicating himself at the same time” (p148). Further, we are all “lumped together” equally as sinners by nature and birth (ibid). So then, it was not Luther but the Jews who discriminated on ethnic grounds – and the men on account of gender. Was Luther wrong to be concerned and object? I think not. But Sherman expressed no concern except that Luther was calling the Jews to account. And he turned truth on its head by accusing Luther of ethnic prejudice, and even hatred, when he was in fact writing against such things.

Another relevant point is that, when Luther referred to the Jews as an ethnic group, he was only referring to them as they referred to themselves, as they distinguished themselves. And when he considered them as a nation – albeit a nation in exile and without a homeland – he was responding to them on the same playing field – or the same war zone, as the case may be – that they had mapped out for themselves. They desired to be set apart as a nation. And that they did indeed map out a war zone for themselves is evident from their vision of a warlike Messiah. They imagined the Messiah as one who would redeem them from their worldly exile with violence and catapult them to world dominance. Luther explained that, in their prayers,

they presume to instruct God and prescribe the manner in which he is to redeem them. ... That is to say that he is to kill and exterminate all of us Goyim through their Messiah, so that they can lay their hands on the land, the goods, and the government of the whole world. And now a storm breaks over us with curses, defamations, and derision that cannot be expressed with words. They wish that sword and war, distress, and every misfortune may overtake us accursed Goyim. They vent their curses on us openly every Saturday in their synagogues and daily in their homes. They teach, urge, and train their children from infancy to remain the bitter, virulent, and wrathful enemies of the Christians. (p264)

Luther learned about these disturbing curses and prayers from converted Jews themselves (more information later). However, Sherman did not appear disturbed by them at all.

In conclusion, as to physical birth and natural attributes, Luther considered all equal. He never wavered from this conviction – which is, of course, fully scriptural. He wrote elsewhere that the apostle Paul also

makes Gentiles and Jews equal, and makes no other distinction except that the oracles of God were entrusted to the natural sons of Abraham (Rom 3:2). This prerogative – that Christ would come from their descendants – the Gentiles did not have. Nevertheless, so far as the grace of salvation is concerned, the Gentiles are made the equals of the Jews, provided that they believe in Christ.⁷

It should not be necessary to say that God is not partial, and neither was Paul, nor Luther. But it is necessary to say, because Luther has been misrepresented and misjudged.

Luther's criticisms of Jewish religion and culture not from worldly prejudice

Considering again the OED definition of antisemitism, to the extent that Luther's quarrel with the Jews reached into the areas of religion and culture, it was due only to how their apostasy from God's word manifested in these areas. It is inevitable that apostasy will manifest in religion and culture. This is true for Jew and non-Jew. Grievous examples that Luther discussed included Jewish prayers for the stabbing and death of the Gentiles (p273), along with the curses already mentioned and more that we will see. Most people are unaware, as I was before I read Luther, that such prayers were contained in the Talmud and other Jewish writings. Our ignorance is partly due to the fact that, when the contents of the Talmud became more widely known, the Jews, fearing for their own safety, expunged the worst passages.⁸ However when Luther lived, they were still part of it.

Luther rightly said such prayers and curses were devilish and malicious. However, Sherman attempted to explain them away. In one note he said these "maledictions" – his genteel, soft-soaping word for curses – were "for the most part" inserted in the Talmud during periods of warfare in former years (n116, p226). It thus appears, though Sherman would not say so plainly, that some of these "maledictions" were more recent – or, at least, were inserted *outside* periods of warfare. But what does it matter, since the Jews were actively reciting these curses in 16th century Germany where their host country was at peace with them? Luther was complaining about contemporary Jewish practices, not things buried away in the past. And why did Sherman accuse Luther of "cruel" language but ignore or minimize prayers and curses that fostered and fed cruel hearts?

Luther discussed other disturbing Jewish practices – practices that aroused his ire, but evidently not Sherman's. He explained how, in addition to cursing their host country and the Gentiles, the Jews ritually cursed the virgin Mary, calling her a whore who had conceived Jesus in adultery with a blacksmith (p257). They also cursed Jesus, and ritually spit on the floor at the mention of his name (ibid). Further, they deliberately perverted his name, so that every time they spoke it, it operated as a secret curse that non-Jews would not understand: they called Jesus *Hebel Vorik*, which signified that he was the very embodiment of lying and deception (ibid; more on this later). Further, when conversing with each other they ritually said *Delateatur nomen eius*, which means "May God exterminate his name," or "May all the devils take him" (ibid). They also ritually cursed Christians:

They treat us Christians similarly in receiving us when we go to them. They pervert the words *Seid Gott willkommen* [literally, "Be welcome to God"] and say, *Sched wil kem!* which means: "Come, devil," or "There comes a devil." Since we are not conversant with the Hebrew, they can vent their wrath on us secretly. While we suppose that they are speaking kindly to us, they are calling down hellfire and every misfortune on our heads. (p257)

Again, Luther learned about these practices – or "abominations," as he very properly called them – from converted Jews who lived in his time. He was not demonstrating antisemitism when he condemned them, but was fully justified. The real error lies with those who call themselves Christian and do not unapologetically condemn such practices.

Luther's recommendations to the authorities

Luther's advice to the German authorities was that, if the Jews would not desist from their abominable practices, their synagogues and schools should be destroyed (p268). This should be done not only for national security, but to demonstrate before God that Christians would not "condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son" (ibid). If the authorities tolerated this when they had the power to prevent it, then, said Luther, they were participants in the abominations (p270). He said that, while inward belief could not be compelled, public blasphemy should be prevented if and so long as it is within our power to prevent it (p268f, 274, 279f, 284f, etc.).

Further, Luther said that if the Jews would not reform, then they should be expelled from Germany and go back to Jerusalem, and their Talmuds and literature should be confiscated. These suggestions also were not unusual for the age. Other nations had expelled the Jews for reasons of national security⁹ – besides which, the Jews, when they were sovereign in Israel, had expelled Christians from their land. He also said their homes should be burned down because "they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues" (p269). At first I thought this was extreme, but then I discovered that this idea also was not new with Luther; in former ages, the authorities burned down the homes of serious offenders as a manifest sign and warning to others.¹⁰ This historical context explains Luther's comment that this measure was intended to "bring home to them the fact that they are not masters in our country, as they boast" (ibid).

Luther repeatedly emphasized that his purpose to ensure the German people did not, as he said, "become guilty sharers before God in the lies, the blasphemy, the defamation, and the curses which the mad Jews indulge in so freely and wantonly against the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, his dear mother, all Christians, all authority, and ourselves" (p274). He had a godly fear of partaking in or enabling the sins of others – especially persistent, open blasphemy against the Son of God. He wrote,

If we permit them to do this where we are sovereign, and protect them to enable them to do so, then we are eternally damned together with them because of their sins and blasphemies, even if we in our persons are as holy as the prophets, apostles, or angels. ...

They dub him *Hebel Vorik*; that is, not merely a liar and a deceiver, but lying and deception itself, viler even than the devil. We Christians must not tolerate that they practice this in their public synagogues, in their books, and in their behavior, openly under our noses and within our hearing in our own country, houses, and regimes. If we do, we, together with the Jews and on their account, will lose God the Father and his dear Son, who purchased us at such cost with his holy blood, and we will be eternally lost, which God forbid.

Accordingly, it must and dare not be considered a trifling matter, but a most serious one, to seek counsel against this. (p284-85)

And so Luther advised the authorities to act forcefully. However, he anticipated that they would not heed his advice. He wrote, "I observe and have often experienced how

indulgent the perverted world is when it should be strict, and, conversely, how harsh it is when it should be merciful" (p276). Nonetheless, he said that he had spoken his mind fully and was thereby exonerated before God (p292). While the world might accuse him of harsh speech, he, like Paul, could say, "I call you as witnesses this same day, that I am clear of the blood of all men. For I have kept nothing back" (Ac. 20:27).

Thus Luther condemned certain activities of the Jews on both civic and spiritual grounds. Sherman, however, would only condemn Luther and side with the Jews, even accusing Luther of helping Hitler find his "final solution." (I note that Luther never used the words "final solution," though Sherman had them in quotation marks [p135].) However, Luther was far from acting or thinking like Hitler, and also far from acting like the Jews themselves. He insisted that no measures against them should be taken out of a desire for vengeance: "We dare not avenge ourselves," he said, but "practice a sharp mercy, to see whether we might save at least a few from the glowing flames" (p268).

Perhaps it is most important of all to note that Luther also insisted the Jews must not be personally harmed. He wrote to pastors:

You, my dear gentleman and friends who are pastors and preachers, I wish to remind very faithfully of your official duty, so that you too may warn your parishioners [to] be on their guard against the Jews and avoid them so far as possible. They should not curse them or harm their persons, however. (p274)

Therefore, all things considered, it is wrong to liken Luther's position to Hitler's murderous "final solution." It is as facile to accuse him of fomenting Hitler's evil as it is to blame Moses for the evils that men have wrought through misuse of the Bible. The devil and the flesh can turn anything to evil.

Again, I acknowledge that Luther sometimes went very far in his condemnations of the Jews. However, I leave it to God to judge if he went "too far," as people frequently accuse him. When the Day of Judgement comes, we will learn the measure of God's wrath against Luther for his indignant speech, as well as the measure of God's wrath against those who cursed his Son. I know that, in that day, I would rather be found on Luther's side than on the side of those who cursed the Son. They definitely went too far – though Sherman never said so. He was too busy defending them. Will his defence win the day before God? And, moreover, though he has successfully accused Luther before men, will he successfully accuse him before God?

What Luther said, and how to judge rightly

I have several times acknowledged that Luther sometimes spoke intemperately in *On the Jews*, and it did not help his cause. However, he never employed obscenities, nor cursed anyone, and I noticed that where his expression became sarcastic and unpleasant it was, quite naturally, after describing unpleasant things. As an author I understand that, during composition and writing, the emotions may become powerfully engaged and it can be difficult to restrain one's pen. Nonetheless, in the interests of complete transparency, and so readers are fully informed about what Luther said, I give the quotation below as an

example of perhaps the most unpleasant and inflammatory kind of polemics Luther employed against the Jews in his book. (We will also see one more example in the next section.) The passage below is about three-quarters of the way through the book. Here Luther was reviewing the situation of the Jews in Germany in the 16th century, and was discussing some of their complaints about their treatment by the Germans. He said their complaints were examples of more lies – or, as he put it:

Now behold what a fine, thick, fat lie they pronounce when they say that they are held captive by us. Jerusalem was destroyed over fourteen hundred years ago, and at that time we Christians were harassed and persecuted by the Jews throughout the world for about three hundred years, as we said earlier. We might well complain that during that time they held us Christians captive and killed us, which is the plain truth. Furthermore, we do not know to the present day which devil brought them into our country. We surely did not bring them from Jerusalem.

In addition, no one is holding them here now. The country and the roads are open for them to proceed to their land whenever they wish. If they did so, we would be glad to present gifts to them on the occasion; it would be good riddance. For they are a heavy burden, a plague, a pestilence, a sheer misfortune for our country. Proof for this is found in the fact that they have often been expelled forcibly from a country, far from being held captive in it. Thus they were banished from France (which they call *Tsorfath*, from Obadiah [20]), which was an especially fine nest. Very recently they were banished by our dear Emperor Charles from Spain, the very best nest of all (which they called *Sefarad*, also on the basis of Obadiah). This year they were expelled from the entire Bohemian crownland, where they had one of the best nests, in Prague. Likewise, during my lifetime they have been driven from Regensburg, Magdeberg, and other places.

If you cannot tolerate a person in a country or home, does that constitute holding him in captivity? In fact, they hold us Christians captive in our own country. They let us work in the sweat of our brow to earn money and property while they sit behind the stove, idle away the time, fart, and roast pears. They stuff themselves, guzzle, and live in luxury and ease from our hard-earned goods. With their accursed usury they hold us and our property captive. Moreover, they mock and deride us because we work and let them play the role of lazy squires at our expense and in our land. Thus they are our masters and we are their servants, with our property, our sweat, and our labor. And by way of reward and thanks they curse our Lord and us! Should the devil not laugh and dance if he can enjoy such a fine paradise at the expense of us Christians? He devours what is ours through his saints, the Jews, and repays us by insulting us, in addition to mocking and cursing both God and man.

They could not have enjoyed such good times in Jerusalem under David and Solomon with their own possessions as they now do with ours, which they daily steal and rob. And yet they wail that we have taken them captive. Indeed, we have captured them and hold them in captivity just as I hold captive my gallstone, my bloody tumor, and all the other ailments and misfortunes which I have to nurse and take

care of with money and goods and all that I have. Alas, I wish that they were in Jerusalem with the Jews and whomever else they would like to have there. (265-66)

These are strong condemnations. (The crude part about roasting pears is apparently, at least in part, a literal translation of a German idiom, and might possibly have been translated less offensively with a dynamically equivalent English idiom.) By contrast, Sherman's condemnations of Luther were in genteel and measured form; to paint Luther as a swineherd he quoted someone else. This raises the question, to what extent should we be swayed by form? Surely in the end what really matters is not a man's form, but whether his judgements are true. God will ultimately judge between Luther and Sherman by their fidelity to truth; therefore, it behoves us to do likewise as well as we can.

Jesus said, "Do not judge according to the outward appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24). This I have attempted to do in this paper, but it was not an easy task. My greatest difficulty was not with Luther's language, but with Sherman's subtlety. What he did not say, or what he only hinted at, made response difficult. As mentioned, aside from his loathing of Luther, he made nothing clear and definite. On the other hand, Luther made everything clear and definite.

Clarity is a sign of truthfulness. This is well-recognized in courts of law. A clear and forthcoming testimony from a witness indicates a desire to tell the truth, and that the witness may be considered reliable. There can be no doubt that Luther's desire for his book was to tell the truth – the whole truth, for the information of his people. The very purpose of his writing was to lay all the facts before them – facts about the teachings and practices of the Jews, and why they should be avoided. On the other hand, as mentioned, Sherman never once clearly denied Luther's reports about the awful prayers and rituals happening in the synagogues, but downplayed them. This absence of denial from a man who exalted himself as an authority on Jewish history is an admission that Luther told the truth. But he chose rather to dwell on Luther's "negative attitude," and on alleged superstitions that fostered Luther's "vivid" ideas. His message was that, even if Luther was sort of correct (I do not know how else to put it), still we should not pay any heed to such a crude and hateful tyrant. Sherman could not credibly deny Luther's reports, so he attacked his form, which was an easy target and distraction.

In one instance I caught Sherman misrepresenting Luther. In his introduction, he mentioned "superstitious" stories from the Middle Ages concerning how the Jews went about poisoning wells. He wrote, "It appears that Luther accepted this aspect of the popular culture at face value," and, "the intensity of his own sense of the demonic lent special vividness to these images in Luther's mind" (p131). However, the truth is that Luther wrote that he did not know if the stories about the poisoned wells were true (p217). Sherman worked closely with the translation and surely knew this.¹¹

We must judge with righteous judgement. Though Luther sometimes spoke intemperately, if what he said was true, he deserves our regard. And though Sherman spoke with genteel measure, if he spoke or judged falsely, we must disregard him.

What Luther did not say, and what we should be saying

As I was writing this paper, I chanced to engage with some people in a Lutheran Facebook group who sought to implicate Luther in the evils of Nazism. Some of the comments appeared to have been drawn from Sherman's introduction to *On the Jews*, which is a sad testimony to that man's enduring influence. Others, like Sherman had done, quoted from Jewish sources. One fellow, hoping to persuade me that Luther's book was very bad, quoted from a Jewish website where one J. Serge alleged,

In *On Jews and Their Lies*, Luther made seven points, among them: that their synagogues, books and schools be burned, their houses razed, the rabbis forbidden to preach "on pain of loss of life or limb" and that Jews should be enslaved, expelled or even killed. "We are at fault in not slaying them," he wrote.¹²

Mr. Serge did not provide citations to check, and left it a mystery about the rest of the seven points; however, I can say with certainty that Luther did not say the Jews should be enslaved and killed. I did find the place where he wrote, "We are at fault in not slaying them" (p267), but from the context it is obvious that this was meant sarcastically and ironically. Indeed, Luther went even further. Commenting on all the Christian blood that the Jews themselves had shed, he wrote, "So we are even at fault in not avenging all this innocent blood of our Lord and of the Christians, which they shed for three hundred years after the destruction of Jerusalem" (ibid). However, this was irony – one thing said and another meant. We know Luther was not really advising the authorities to avenge Jewish misdeeds, contemporary or ancient – neither with personal violence, nor by enslaving or subjugating the Jews, nor in any way, because on the very next page he wrote, "We dare not avenge ourselves. Vengeance a thousand times worse than we could wish them already has them by the throat" (p268). Serge took Luther's comment out of context.

However, Luther did get carried away in this place. I do not want to also be guilty of omitting relevant context. The full quotation was, "So we are even at fault in not avenging all this innocent blood of our Lord and of the Christians, which they shed for three hundred years after the destruction of Jerusalem, and the blood of the children they have shed since then (which still shines forth from their eyes and their skin). We are at fault for not slaying them" (p267). Luther's comment about children's blood shining forth from Jewish eyes and skin was wrong and inflammatory, and is worthy to be condemned.

But to return to the greater picture, Luther's concern here was that the Germans had received the Jews into their land and treated them with goodness, offering them freedom and civic protection, but their goodness was not appreciated or rewarded. "We do not curse them, but wish them well, physically and spiritually," he wrote (p267). It was wrong for the German authorities to hold their peace and allow the Jews to agitate for evil in the country. However, we saw already that Luther's specific advice was that Christians should do no personal harm to the Jews; further, he never counselled the authorities to do them personal harm either. After reviewing the grim facts, his advice was limited to destroying their synagogues and places of cursing – and this not as an act of vengeance, nor out of hatred, but:

This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son and of his Christians. For whatever we tolerated in the past unknowingly – and I myself was unaware of it – will be pardoned by God. But if we, now that we are informed, were to protect and shield such a house for the Jews, existing right before our very nose, in which they lie about, blasphemes, curse, vilify, and defame Christ and us (as was heard above), it would be the same as if we were doing all this. (p269)

Finally, there is the matter of what we ourselves should be saying about Luther's book. We should point out that it was the Jews who were praying for the subjugation and death of Christians and Gentiles. We should condemn their prayers and curses as demonically inspired. I am tired of hearing people fault Luther for one book, but not the Jews for all their books and literature, nor for their on-going practices, which were wrong on an infinitely grander scale. What is this but to strain at gnats and swallow a camel?

A closer look at Franklin Sherman's notes and comments

Franklin Sherman strained at the gnats of Luther's language but swallowed Judaism's camel: he revealed an active bias in favour of rabbinic doctrine and tradition. This is evident not only from his opposition to Luther and reliance on Jewish sources, but from his favourable treatment of Judaism. At the same time, his guarded treatment of certain basic tenets of Christianity, including (as will be seen) salvation by faith alone and what he called a "Christological focus," belie any pretences of Christian orthodoxy. He characterized Luther's bible teaching in *On the Jews* as "dependant on his medieval predecessors in the chain of Christian polemicists against the Jews" (p130) – as if the man who stood alone to defend his hard-won insights, saying "Here I stand, I can do no more," was following a herd of Christian racists.

In addition to his fourteen-page introduction, Sherman added 204 footnotes to Luther's book, some quite lengthy. Therefore, we can only see a tiny portion of them here. With all his footnotes, *On the Jews* is 170 pages long in the Concordia House edition, so the notes average more than one per page. As mentioned, they often tend to undermine, discount, or contradict Luther and his sources. This is done either directly, or indirectly by referring readers to contrary writers and commentators. Throughout, Sherman assumes an attitude of superiority, as one qualified to sit as judge and arbiter of Luther's "thought," knowledge, and scholarship. He sometimes disputed Luther's interpretation of Hebrew or German words, evidently judging his own understanding to be superior based on "modern etymological research" (e.g. notes 42, 44, 45, pages 179-80).

Sherman's bias

Sherman showed a marked preference for the anti-Christian propaganda of Judaistic authors. For example, he quoted approvingly from a Jewish work entitled *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Antisemitism* (n8, p139). However, he never reflected upon the Jewish contempt of Christianity. He also praised as "impressive" a Roman Catholic work, *Anti-Semitism and the Christian Mind* (n23, p133), but never considered anti-Christianity

and the Jewish mind. Further, he cast doubt on the work of Anthony Margaritha, the Jewish rabbi mentioned above, who converted to Christianity and was eyewitness to – indeed, a former practitioner of – the Jewish practices he exposed. In any true court, eyewitness testimony is preferred above all, but Sherman gave Margaritha little or no weight. In his mind, everything was weighted against the Christians – not only against Luther, but against Christians generally, including the Church fathers, as mentioned above, and against converted Jews. This strongly suggests that his antipathy toward Luther was primarily a response to his faith; Sherman evinced not only a bias in favour of Judaism, but was subtly anti-Christian.

Anthony Margaritha's book, called *The Whole Jewish Faith*, exposed many practices of Judaism in the 16th century – not in medieval times, though Sherman insisted on distracting readers by sending them back in time, and by painting the problems as bygone. He gave the full title of Margaritha's book in a footnote, which title, he said, "gives vivid idea of its contents" (n18, p130). The reader may decide how vivid the title was; here it is as translated into English by Sherman in his note:

The whole Jewish faith, together with a thorough and truthful account of all the regulations, ceremonies, and prayers both for family and public worship, as observed by the Jews throughout the year, with excellent and well-founded arguments against their faith.

What Sherman calls vivid is simply clear and straightforward.

Sherman also informed readers that the Jews in Augsburg complained so much about Margaritha's book, they were able to get him imprisoned and then expelled from their area (p130). The unspoken inference is that this proved their complaints were justified; they had successfully accused the eyewitness – who had become their great enemy by leaving their faith – of lying, and they got him expelled. However, there was no reason for Margaritha to write his book – at considerable personal risk, because he knew his fellow Jews – unless he simply wanted to warn people about the faith he once practiced. Further, Luther judged Margaritha credible, and he was not the only former Jew to come forward with such stories. I certainly trust Luther's judgement above Sherman's.

Ironically, Sherman was unruffled by Margaritha's expulsion from his homeland, though he characterized Luther's advice to expel the orthodox Jews who would not desist from cursing as "inhuman" (n173, p268). Further, the fact that the Jews were able to get Margaritha expelled proves their political clout and thus supports Luther; he had argued that they were not oppressed in Germany, not justified in complaining that they were held captive there (see quotation at page 10 above). Rather, they had grown powerful and wealthy as bankers and lenders, and could influence and purchase favours from the German authorities (e.g. p288). Perhaps Margaritha's expulsion was one such favour. Sherman acknowledged that the German authorities favoured the Jews because they "played an important role in the economy," and he said this might have been a factor in refusing to follow Luther's advice to expel them if they did not reform (n173, p268).

A final point about Margaritha's punishment is that it shows how common expulsion was in the 16th century. Luther's advice was not unusual or remarkable, and, moreover, the Jews did not hesitate to avail themselves of the remedy against their own.

Further evidence of Sherman's Judaizing bias is that he would not acknowledge, but discredited, Luther's able refutation of the Jewish claims to be the people of God based on their lineage and on circumcision. A close look at his comments reveals that this is because he sympathized with those claims. He not only sympathized with the plight of the Jewish people, as all decent people do, he sympathized with Judaism's ethnocentric dogma. That was the real difference between him and Luther, and it made him Luther's adversary. He was more a Jew than a Christian, let alone a Lutheran. As Jesus said, no one can serve two masters; either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will lean to the one and neglect the other (M't. 6:24). Some illustrations of Sherman's bias:

1) He wrote (p132), "The question at issue in large portions of [*On the Jews*] is: Whose interpretation of these sacred Scriptures – that of the Jews or that of the Christians – is correct?" For him to even ask this question, as if it were moot, speaks volumes. He then continued in the same vein with questions like, "Has the new covenant so entirely replaced the old that the Jews no longer have any claim to the title people of God?" As usual, he did not declare his own view, but he suggested to readers that the question was undecided and refused to reject the claims of Judaism.

2) He did, however, reject Luther's refutations of Jewish claims to be the people of God as "Christian polemics against Judaism" and "anti-Jewish polemics" (notes 36-39, p176-79). That shows what side he was on.

3) Sherman wrote,

Luther considers what he calls the "false boasts" of the Jews: their pride of lineage and homeland and their reliance on the covenant of circumcision and on the law. All these Luther considers to be forms of "works-righteousness" and hence contrary to the fundamental principle not only of the Reformation but also, in his view, of the entire Scriptures. (p133)

Again, Sherman would not accept Luther's characterization of the Jewish claims as "false boasts." He also appears to question the "fundamental principle" of the Reformation, salvation by faith alone, which he characterized as merely Luther's view. I believe he also mischaracterized Luther's comments in this essay, that Jewish "boasts" were a form of "works-righteousness," however he gave no citations for me to check.

4) Sherman would not say that righteousness is a gift of God by grace through faith alone, but only that this was something Luther "insisted" on (p133).

5) Quoting from a Jewish source that he admired, Sherman accused Christians who rejected rabbinical doctrine of ingratitude and of introducing a "new religion":

As a modern Jewish thinker has written, speaking of the new religion's daughter relationship to the old: "The children did not arise and call the mother blessed; instead, they called the mother blind." (p127-28).

According to Sherman, therefore, Judaism is the blessed mother of Christianity, and Christians – even the Lord himself, who called the Jewish leaders blind guides (M't. 23:16) – are as ungrateful children. O what great darkness this reveals.

6) Sherman spoke approvingly of the Jewish response to an earlier essay that Luther wrote, saying, "Some Jewish people even hailed Luther's work as presaging the coming of the Messiah" (p126). His treatment suggests he did not believe the core Jewish problem is the denial that the Messiah has already come, or that he was unconcerned about this.

7) Sherman also wrote about the "merits of Judaism" (p127). However, he never spoke of the merits of Christianity; he was too busy blaming Christians for the Jewish situation.

8) Sherman considered what he called Luther's "Christological" focus – that is, Luther's focus on Christ – as leading him astray (e.g. pp132, 134). In this, he assuredly agreed with the rabbis. His comments were ambiguous and subtle, but the inference is undeniable.

I could quote more, but this suffices to show Sherman's bias, and explains many of the problems we will see below.

The three learned Jews

At page 191 of *On the Jews*, Sherman added a long note on a story Luther related about a meeting he once had with "three learned Jews." The men had discussed Jeremiah 23:6, which, according to Sherman's note, reads, "This is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'" Luther had debated the meaning of this passage with the three learned Jews, but in vain.

In his note on this story, Sherman quoted from scholarly "interpreters of Luther" who opined that this incident was "pivotal in Luther's development of a negative attitude toward the Jews." Sherman and his like-minded associates could not understand that there was nothing personal in Luther's views. Quite simply, Luther had learned from experience how stubbornly the Jews resisted the truth: he had gained understanding, not an attitude. Indeed, he had the understanding of the prophets and apostles: "You stiff-necked people, and of uncircumcised hearts and ears! You have always resisted the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you" (Ac 7:51).

I will interject here two experiences of my own. After having repeated, unhappy experiences with a certain Jewish man, a distant in-law, I learned how anti-Christian some really are. I was obliged to refuse to keep company with this man after he persisted in disparaging Christ over my repeated objections. He also mocked the sacrament of Holy Communion in terms that I cannot repeat. I had overlooked his treatment of me, but could no longer tolerate how he spoke about the Lord and sacred things. When I discussed my experiences with Hebrew Christians, they were not surprised, and confirmed that Jewish animosity toward Christians is not uncommon. One woman raised in a Jewish home told me that her own people "do not like Christians." As a result of my experience, I am now more aware. I also understand Luther better. I do not have any personal animosity toward Jews, but I suppose Sherman would accuse me of antisemitism and a negative attitude.

My second experience concerns a Jewish website that I follow for various reasons related to my research. One of the persistent efforts of the owner is to teach against Christ. He does not openly declare his own faith on the website, and the reason is, I believe, to avoid scaring away the Christians, whom he lures in by promising free Hebrew lessons. He then sends his subscribers Jewish teachings aimed at undermining the record of the New Testament: Jesus was a stone mason, not a carpenter; Jesus' last words on the cross were not *Eli Eli Lama Sabach'tani*, but the *Shema*; in Hebrew, "grace" does not mean unmerited favour, but has more to do with beauty and value, etc. This is the sort of poison Luther wanted to warn his Christian people against.

To return to the incident with the three learned Jews: in Sherman's note he implied that Luther's understanding of Jeremiah 23:6 flowed from a private interpretation. He referred to it as a passage "which he [Luther] interprets messianically." I found this confusing. Did Sherman not interpret it messianically? It is clear to me that Jeremiah 23:6 is a reference to the promised Messiah. However, Sherman cast doubt both on its messianic nature and on Luther's understanding – just as the three learned Jews would have done. Indeed, Sherman was in every point doing the work of the rabbis: subtly denying the tenets of the faith, doubting prophecy, and accusing the brethren.

"Yeshu" as a curse

In his book, Luther complained about the Jewish abbreviation of the Hebrew name "Yeshua" to "Yeshu" (as transliterated). This was devised as a deliberate insult to Jesus:

They robbed Jesus of the significance of his name, which in Hebrew means "savior" or "helper." ... The Jews, in their malice, call him [Yeshu], which in Hebrew is neither a name nor a word but three letters, like ciphers or numeral letters. ... in this manner they use the name [Yeshu] signifying 316. This number then is to denote another word, in which *Hebel Vorik* is found ... and when they utter the word [Yeshu] in their prayer, they spit on the ground three times in honor of our Lord and of all Christians. (p256-57)¹³

As we have seen, Luther explained that *Hebel Vorik* means "not merely a liar and deceiver, but lying and deception itself" (p285). However, in his note here Sherman observed that Margaritha translated *Hebel Vorik* differently, as "folly and vanity." The purpose of the note is unclear, except perhaps that it serves to undermine Luther's reliability, but it also confirms that the Jews were insulting and cursing Jesus.¹⁴

In 16th-century Germany, a Jewish booklet called *Toledot Yeshu* was circulating, which was a counter-history of Jesus and was apparently a concern to Luther.¹⁵ It contained many slanders of Jesus, and ascribed to him an illegitimate birth and heretical activities.¹⁶ Neither Sherman nor Luther mentioned it, but it is part of the historical context and illustrates the Jewish use of the "Yeshu" insult.

Troubling verses in the Talmud

Luther explained how the Talmud, the Jews' religious book, taught that it is no sin for a Jew to kill a Gentile, but only to kill a fellow Israelite. Likewise, the Talmud said Jews may

break their covenants with Gentiles, but not with Jews (p226). Sherman's note on this place says, "Luther cites no references, but the point made here was a commonplace in the anti-Semitic literatures." Sherman did not deny that the Talmud contained these teachings, but at the same time implied that Luther had in error accepted an anti-Semitic "commonplace." He also left it open for the reader to infer that Luther cited no references because the Talmud contained no such teachings. However, the fact is that Luther never cited references, as Sherman knew. Further, supplying missing references was one of Sherman's editorial tasks, so one wonders why he did not do this for the Talmudic sources.

But, in fact, Sherman tacitly acknowledged that Luther spoke truly about these Talmudic teachings when he said that they "originated, for the most part, in periods of warfare" (see above p7, and n116, p226 in *On the Jews*). This explains why he did not plainly deny them: he could not. Instead, his device was to divert readers to a source that explained "the role of medieval superstition in reinforcing this picture of Jewish enmity toward Christians" (ibid). Thus, even though the teachings Luther complained about were undeniable and were still part of the Talmud when he wrote, the lesson Sherman wanted readers to take away was that Jewish enmity toward Christians was a "reinforced medieval superstition."

A murderous Messiah

Luther referred to Talmudic prayers that called for the Messiah to come and slay the Christians, and to make the Jews lords over all nations and peoples (p293). This reflected their long-held desire for worldly dominion, which they believed was God's promise to them.

In his note on this, Sherman excused these prayers as, according to his esteemed Jewish authority, "a minority opinion in the Talmud." This is absurd. Regular prayers for the slaughter of Christians are excusable as a "minority opinion"? Thus Luther spoke truly, but Sherman poo-pooed the evil prayers while he magnified Luther as evil for objecting to them.

Ben Koziba, a failed Messiah

Beginning at page 233 in *On the Jews*, Luther gave details of Jewish persecutions of Christians in the first century. These are partly documented in the New Testament: the Christians had to flee Jerusalem, Stephen being the first martyr (Acts 7). The Jews then pursued the Christians to other areas (Acts 8 & 11)—especially the apostle Paul, whom they caused to be frequently and viciously beaten (2Cor. 11:23-25). Luther then took up the story of succeeding events after the close of the New Testament canon, and discussed both Jewish and Roman persecutions.

Then, still discussing events of the first century, Luther mentioned a fascinating account of how the Jews attempted to make out one of their own, a man known as Ben Koziba or Bar Koziban, to be the true Messiah. They did this because their own prophets had determined that the Messiah must have come when Jesus came. This is one of the points Luther raised against them: they knew from their own Scriptures and their own scribes and

prophets that the Messiah was then due, and it was blindingly obvious that Jesus had fulfilled the prophecies (p230f). The information Luther gave about the Jews' efforts to establish their own Messiah is fascinating and supports his arguments.

Sherman added no less than ten notes on Luther's brief account of Ben Koziba, the failed Jewish Messiah. A few of the notes presume to confirm or qualify Luther's interpretation of a Hebrew word according to "modern lexicons." Others refer readers to the *Jewish Encyclopedia* for "further discussion of the events dealt with by Luther" (n132), or to consider the "peculiarities" of Luther's "chronology." Another note, commenting on the history of Jewish persecutions, says "reports of widespread massacres, however, appear to be due to later exaggeration" (n137). Thus Sherman would sweep the whole affair under the rug because the massacres were not as widespread (?) as reported. Every effort was made to weaken Luther's account without plainly refuting it.

Similarity with Islam, contrast with Christianity

At pages 292-97 (and elsewhere), Luther likened the Jewish aspirations to conquer the world by the sword of violence to the aspirations of the Turks (Muslims), who had by then conquered many nations and were threatening Germany from without her borders. Readers who understand Islam will already have noticed similarities between it and Judaism.¹⁷ Luther wrote that the Jews wanted to

be and [to] possess all the world's gold, goods, joys, and delights, while we Christians will be their servants. This coincides entirely with the thoughts and teachings of Muhammad. He kills us Christians as the Jews would like to do, occupies the land, and takes over our property, our joys and pleasures. If he were a Jew and not an Ishmaelite, the Jews would have accepted him as the Messiah long ago, or they would have made him the Kokhba [Jewish military leader who led the Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire]. (p293)

Luther then contrasted the warlike Messiah of the Turks and Jews to the true Messiah, who does not kill and murder in this world, but who saves from eternal death in the next. Luther's strong faith and love for Christ glow in this passage. Concerning what he called the grief of the fear of death, he wrote,

If I had a Messiah who could remedy this grief, so that I would no longer have to fear death but would be always and eternally sure of life ... and no longer have to tremble before the wrath of God, then my heart would leap for joy and be intoxicated with sheer delight; then would a fire of love for God be enkindled, and my praise and thanks would never cease. Even if he would not, in addition, give me gold, silver, and other riches, all the world would nonetheless be a genuine paradise for me, though I lived in a dungeon.

This is the kind of Messiah we Christians have, and we thank God, the Father of all mercy, with the full, overflowing joy of our hearts, gladly and readily forgetting all the sorrow and harm which the devil wrought for us in Paradise. For our loss has been richly compensated for, and all has been restored to us through this Messiah. Filled with such joy, the apostles sang and rejoiced in dungeons and amid all

misfortunes, as did even young girls ... The wretched Jews, on the other hand, who rejected this Messiah, have languished and perished since that time in anguish of heart, in trouble, trembling, wrath, impatience, malice, blasphemy, and cursing, as we read in Isaiah 65[:14f]: "Behold, my servants shall sing for gladness of heart, but you shall cry out for pain of heart, and shall wail for anguish of spirit. You shall leave your name to my chosen for a curse, and the Lord God will slay you; But his servants he will call by a different name." (p294)

Luther also spoke of the Christian way of peace, which, in contrast with historic Judaism and Islam, uses no sword except that of the tongue. In the kingdom of Christ, Luther says, we beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks: we war with violence no more. He discussed Isaiah 11:9, "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord," and wrote,

We poor blind Goyim cannot conceive of this "knowledge of the Lord" as a sword, but as the instruction by which one learns to know God. Our understanding agrees with Isaiah 2, cited above, which also speaks of the knowledge which the Gentiles shall pursue. For knowledge does not come by the sword, but by teaching and hearing, as we stupid Goyim assume. Likewise Isaiah 53[:11]: "By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous"; that is, by teaching them and by their hearing him and believing in him. What else might "his knowledge" mean? In brief, the knowledge of the Messiah must come by preaching.

The proof of this is before your eyes, namely, that the apostles used no spear or sword but solely their tongues...

And consider the miracles. The Roman Empire and the whole world abounded with idols to which the Gentiles adhered; the devil was mighty and defended himself vigorously. All swords were against it, and yet the tongue alone purged the entire world of all these idols without a sword. ... and further – this is the greatest miracle – it forgives and blots out all sin, creates happy, peaceful, patient hearts, devours death, locks the doors of hell and opens the gates of heaven, and gives eternal life. Who can enumerate all the blessings effected by God's word? In brief, it makes all who hear and believe it the children of God and heirs of the kingdom of heaven. Do you not call this a kingdom, power, might, dominion, glory? Yes, most certainly, this is a comforting kingdom and the true *chemdath* of all Gentiles. And should I, in company with the Jews, desire or accept bloodthirsty Kokhba in place of such a kingdom? As I said, in such circumstances I would rather be a sow than a man. (p296-97)

It is noteworthy that on these Christian teachings from Luther, and his great words of faith, Sherman was silent. He added no notes at all. But we already know that he loathed Luther's tongue, the only sword that man ever wielded, and that he regarded Christians as ungrateful children who called the mother blind.

Where Sherman was correct, though he did not believe it

Sherman did, however, say one thing truly. He acknowledged that Luther had, from the very beginning of his career as a Reformer, always been perfectly consistent concerning

the Jews: he had always said that they were continuing as a nation to suffer under God's wrath, and that they were paying the penalty for their rejection of Christ, in fulfilment of prophecy (p126-27). Of course! However, though Sherman correctly summarized Luther's position, he did not believe it, and called it a "negative medieval stereotype." He wrote,

The Jews, Luther asserts in these lectures, suffer continually under God's wrath: they are paying the penalty for their rejection of Christ. They spend all their efforts in self justification, but God will not hear their prayers. Neither kindness nor severity will improve them. They become constantly more stubborn and more vain. Moreover, they are active enemies of Christ: they blaspheme and defame him, spreading their evil influence even into Christian hearts. As for Jewish efforts to interpret Scripture, these, Luther asserts, are simply lies. They forsake the word of God and follow the imaginations of their hearts. ...

In short, the evidence indicates that the [early Luther] shared to the full in the medieval prejudices against the Jews [as did the mature Luther]. From this perspective, his more favorable attitude toward the Jews as expressed in the early 1520s is to be understood as a temporary modification of the underlying negative stereotype which characterized his earliest statements, and to which he returned in his later treatises. That underlying stereotype, in turn, can be understood only in terms of the medieval background. (p126-27)

Thus Luther, the medieval theological dinosaur!

It is obvious that Sherman did not understand the Christian faith, and that he walked in the spiritual exile of the Jews. Not only did he not understand the Bible any better than they did, he shared their desire to discredit Christian opponents of Judaism and those who would expose its worst secrets. Concordia House erred greatly by publishing his Jewish opinions and his slanders against Luther. However, God has used their error to make Luther's work available to those who are willing to learn from it.¹⁸

Luther judged indifferently among men

So then, despite his sometimes-unpleasant language, Luther did not judge the Jews in a bigoted manner. He was motivated by his love of truth and righteousness, and of God's word and his Son. Accordingly, he judged everyone by this same objective standard. However, post-moderns who reject an objective standard, and anyone who does not accept the Christian faith and Bible (properly understood) as the standard, will consider this prejudiced and hateful. They do this because they cannot understand, for these things are spiritually known and discerned (1Co. 2).

Luther wrote not only against the Jews, but in other essays he wrote against papist Roman Catholics, Sabbatarians, Sacramentarians, and others. As he said in *On the Jews*:

Jews, Turks, papists, radicals abound everywhere. All of them claim to be the church and God's people in accord with their conceit and boast, regardless of the one true faith and the obedience to God's commandments through which alone people become and remain God's children. Even if they do not all pursue the same course, but

one chooses this way, another that way, resulting in a variety of forms, they nonetheless all have the same intent and ultimate goal; namely, by means of their own deeds they want to manage to become God's people. And thus they boast and brag that they are the ones whom God will esteem. They are the foxes of Samson which are tied together to tail to tail, but whose heads turn away in different directions.

But as we noted earlier, that is beyond the comprehension of the Jews, as well as of the Turks and papists. As Saint Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, "The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the spirit of God, because they are spiritually discerned" [1Cor. 2:14]. Thus the words of Isaiah 6 come true: "Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive." For they do not know what they hear, see, say, or do. And yet they do not concede that they are blind and deaf. (p175)

Thus not only is "the mother" blind, but all who will not see and hear are blind, and are deaf. Further, all are at risk of increasing darkness accompanied with increasingly sinful and even murderous desires. In another essay, drawing again from his vast knowledge of history, Luther gave the Arians and Donatists as examples of dangerous Christian apostates:

As a rule, fanatics, when the spirit of lies has taken possession of them and led them away from the true faith, have not been able to stop there, but have followed the lie with murder and taken up the sword, as a sign that they were children of the father of all lies and murder. Thus we read how the Arians became murderers and how one of the greatest bishops of Alexandria, Lucius by name, drove the orthodox out of the city, and went into the ship and held a naked sword in his own hand until the orthodox were all on board and had to go away. And these tender, holy bishops committed many other murders even at that time, which is almost twelve hundred years ago. Again, in St. Augustine's time, almost eleven hundred years ago, the holy father abundantly shows in his books how many murders the Donatists committed.¹⁹

Thus Luther did not single out or blame the Jews as the only ones capable of murderous apostasy. He often (as also did William Tyndale) said that the Gentiles who reject God's word effectively crucify the Son, and that if Jesus were present among them, they would do no differently than the Jews had done. Elsewhere he wrote of the pope that he "is a robber who would sell Christ himself if he had him in his hands as the Jews had him."²⁰ He put all apostates and persecutors in the same basket. Moreover, he did not put all the Jews in this basket, as an ethnocentric prejudice would lead him to do. He distinguished between the "blind, impenitent Jews," who rejected the word, and the penitent (e.g. p299). But he could not be expected to clarify this every time he mentioned "the Jews" in his book (as I also cannot in this essay). It is up to the reader to be sensible. When Luther condemned the Jews as "obstinate," he meant those who were obstinate. He meant those steeped in anti-Christian hate, not the rational and moderate among them. He also noted how fiercely the (obstinate) Jews persecuted their own people who became Christians, not only in the first century, but continuing up to Luther's time (p299). Anthony Margaritha was an example.

Luther also wrote against his fellow countrymen where he saw sin. He once wrote that greed, usury, and ingratitude for God's word were common among the Germans, who suffer many misfortunes for their "execrable sins," and fall prey to "the devil [who] at all times foists his frauds and darkness upon the unwary."²¹ He also condemned the German peasants for their insurrection under Müntzer,²² who perverted Moses' law much as the rabbis did.

And so Luther did not blame the Jews for being Jews, but only those among them who persisted in sinful practices and "obstinate" and "stiff-necked" apostasy from God's word – which was also God's constant quarrel with them throughout the Old Testament. As Luther notes (and as the Bible teaches), when their apostasy was full, they (though not all of them) crucified the Son of God, the true Messiah. But so also would any others have done in their place, for as Paul warns, these things happened to them as examples for us (1Co. 10:11). There is no difference Jew and Gentile (Ro. 10:12).

From Luther: the last word

Though Luther was not perfect and was not always right – no man is – he was trustworthy, a good judge and counsellor, and a true and fervent Christian. He was known as a kind and generous man, who freely took into his own home the sick, the homeless, and the needy.²³ He was also clearly called by God to his work and career, and spoke as plainly and boldly as any prophet: if he had sought to please men, he would not be the servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10). If the word "hate" must be used to describe him, he was as the Psalmist who loved God's word and hated every wrong path (Psalm 119:128).

Three points ought to be emphasized in conclusion:

- 1) Luther condemned ethnocentric prejudice. He insisted that all peoples are as one, descended from the same ancestors, and that love requires impartiality. On this ground he condemned the prejudice of the Jews themselves.
- 2) He did, however, strongly oppose the anti-Christian teachings and practices of Judaism, which were satanic and blasphemous.
- 3) Luther's opposition to Judaism was based on a thorough knowledge of ancient and contemporary Jewish history, literature, and practice, all of which he carefully reviewed in his book so that people would understand the reasons for his concerns. Despite intemperate language at times, he spoke necessary truth.

It is fitting that Luther have the last word. After thoroughly addressing the rabbinical falsehoods and "lies," he wrote,

I, a plain insignificant saint in Christ, venture to oppose all of them singlehandedly, and to defend this viewpoint easily, comfortably, and gladly. However, it is impossible to convert the devil and his own, nor are we commanded to attempt this. It suffices to uncover their lies and to reveal the truth. Whoever is not actuated to believe the truth for the sake of his own soul will surely not believe it for my sake....

But for us Christians they [the Jews] stand as a terrifying example of God's wrath. As Saint Paul declares in Romans 11, we must fear God and honor his word as long as the time of grace remains, so that we do not meet with a similar or worse fate. We have seen this happen in the case of the papacy and of Muhammed. The example of the Jews demonstrates clearly how easily the devil can mislead people, after they once have digressed from the proper understanding of Scripture, into such blindness and darkness that it can be readily grasped and perceived simply by natural reason, yes, even by irrational beasts. And yet they who daily teach and hear God's word do not recognize this darkness, but regard it as the true light. Oh Lord God, have mercy on us! (p253)

And so, was Martin Luther anti-Semitic? No. Anti-falsehood, yes, and anti-Judaism and all false religion, but without ethnocentric or worldly prejudice – and despite his strong words, without personal violence or hatred. Those who condemn Luther may think they do God service, but they err.

And to conclude with Luther's own sentiment, I will say that I have published this little essay so that I may be found among those who spoke truly about God's hard-working and devoted servant, and not among his accusers. And again, I, a plain insignificant saint in Christ, venture to oppose all Luther's accusers singlehandedly, and to defend his view-point comfortably and gladly.

He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man, will receive the reward of a righteous man. (Matthew 10:41)

I know the blasphemy of those who call themselves Jews, and are not, but are the congregation of Satan. (Revelation 2:9)

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ENDNOTES

¹ References to *On the Jews and Their Lies* are to volume 47 of the American edition of the series *Luther's Works* by Concordia Publishing House.

² I have assumed throughout that Sherman was the author of the introduction to *On the Jews*. He is listed as the editor of volume 47, and his initials follow the foreword to that volume; however, there are no initials following the introduction to *On the Jews*. Martin H. Bertram was the original translator of *On the Jews*, but Sherman oversaw an extensive revision of his work (foreword pxi; see also endnote 6 below). For a biography of Sherman, see endnote 5.

³ Modern Jewish seductions of Christianity include a widespread form of Christian Zionism, which has resulted in modern Bible translators changing the Scriptures to support their Judaization. See my paper “Christian Zionism: Rebuilding Jericho” posted on Academia.edu at https://www.academia.edu/43077531/Christian_Zionism_Rebuilding_Jericho, and the discussion in, *The Story of the Matthew Bible: Part 2, The Scriptures Then and Now* (available on Amazon or through the bookstore at www.baruchhousepublishing.com).

⁴ Unpleasant language is often seen in literary works from the 16th century. It chanced, as I was writing this, that I read a book noting the same phenomenon in French literature. The author remarked that a French work written in the latter part of the 16th century was more well-spoken than others of its time: “Son ton, d’ailleurs, n’est point chargé d’exclamations, ni de ces termes de *chien*, de *pourceau*, de *coquin*, si familiers aux écrivains de son siècle.” (Anonymous foreword to Jerome Bolsec, *Vies de Jean Calvin et de Théodore de Bèze*, first written c. 1580, [facsimile of later reprint, Genève: Chez les Principaux Libraries, 1835], xiv.)

⁵ A biography posted online reads: “Dr. Franklin Sherman was the English Language Editor and Managing Editor of this web site from 2002 to 2007. He received his B.A. from Muhlenberg College, his Master of Divinity from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. He began his teaching career at the University of Iowa, then served as Tutor and Dean of Lutheran Students at Mansfield College, Oxford, England, and for 23 years was Professor of Christian Ethics at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, where he also served as Director of Graduate Studies and Dean. From 1989 to 1996, he was Director of the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding of Muhlenberg College (Allentown, Pennsylvania). From 1996 to 2006, he served as Associate for Interfaith Relations with the Department for Ecumenical Affairs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Dr. Sherman has been a visiting professor at the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, the Graduate School of Ecumenical Studies in Bossey, Switzerland, the Irish School of Ecumenics (Dublin), Japan Lutheran Theological Seminary (Tokyo), and the University of Zimbabwe (Harare). He has spent periods of research in Israel at the Ecumenical Institute for Theological Studies and the Shalom Hartman Institute. He has written numerous articles, essays, and reviews in the field of theology, ethics, and Christian-Jewish relations, and edited the volume of Luther’s Works: American Edition containing Luther’s writings on the Jews. In 1999 he served on a panel of scholars reviewing the text of the Oberammergau Passion Play for prejudice and stereotypes. He has participated in Christian-Jewish dialogues at the local, national, and international levels, and served for 15 years as chair of the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. At the Fifteenth National Workshop on Christian-Jewish Relations held in Stamford, Connecticut, he was presented with an award recognizing his lifetime contributions in this field.” (www.jcrelations.net/article/sherman-franklin.html, accessed March 16, 2021.)

⁶ Sherman wrote in his foreword to volume 47 that Martin Bertram’s original translation of *On the Jews and Their Lies* was “extensively revised by the undersigned [i.e. himself] and by the staff of Fortress Press, with the aid also of ... Wilhelm C. Linss.” However, he did not provide information about the purpose or nature of these extensive revisions.

⁷ Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Volume 4, 64.

⁸ I researched the content of the Talmud and the question of redactions by the Jews about eight years ago, when I first read *On the Jews* but before I formed any intention of writing about it, so I did not record my sources. However, I have made fresh enquiries. I spoke with a Hebrew Christian who lives in Israel, Mr. Ben Mizrahi, whom I quote with permission here and in the notes below. I asked him if he knew whether offensive prayers and passages had been expunged from the Talmud, and he confirmed that this is the case. He said, "The parts Luther was objecting to have been expunged. It is common knowledge." However, he said there is talk in Israel about the reinsertion of these parts into the modern Aramaic (not Hebrew) Talmud. He also mentioned "anti-missionaries" among the orthodox Jews, who "pray those prayers against anyone who disagrees with them."

I also found information in a Wikipedia article on "Birkat haMinim," the name for liturgical Judaistic curses, or "maledictions," on heretics. The article reads, "In the early premodern form in Europe, the malediction was applied to several kinds of people or groups: Jews who apostatized to Christianity, Christians themselves, the enemies of the Jews, and to the governing authorities of the Christian world. From the 13th century, the terminology used in the prayer and rabbinical explications of their referent, Christians, began to undergo a process of censorship, imposed from outside or regulated internally, once Christian authorities learnt of them through information supplied by Jewish converts and from scholars who began to access the texts in the original language." The citation, which I have not investigated, is Teppler, Yaakov Y., (2007). *Birkat HaMinim: Jews and Christians in Conflict in the Ancient World*. Mohr Siebeck. ISBN 978-3-161-49350-8. ("Birkat haMinim," Wikipedia, accessed April 2, 2021.)

Some rather Orwellian contributions to the Wikipedia article refer to ritual Judaistic curses as "blessings." An example given of a murderous "blessing" is:

"For the apostates (meshumaddim) let there be no hope,

"and uproot the kingdom of arrogance (malkhut zadom), speedily and in our days.

"May the Nazarenes (ha-nazarim/nošrim/notzrim) and the sectarians (minim) perish as in a moment.

"Let them be blotted out of the book of life, and not be written together with the righteous.

"You are praised, O Lord, who subdues the arrogant." (Ibid.)

⁹ At page 266 of *On the Jews*, Sherman notes that after charges of "treasonable intrigue" with the Muslims – that is, to speak plainly, conspiracy to commit treason with the Muslims – the Jews were expelled from Prague during the years 1541-43." The Muslims were then actively threatening Europe. At page 268 (note 173), Sherman acknowledged that Luther's proposals were "paralleled in the other anti-Jewish literature of the period," but alleged that Luther went further. Luther discussed the expulsions of the Jews from other countries at page 265 of *On the Jews*, as quoted at page 10 in this paper.

¹⁰ See for example "The Razing of the House in Greek Society," from *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 115 (1985), 79-102. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/284191>), where it is written, "the destruction of dwelling places was especially awesome and charged with symbolic as well as practical meaning" (p79).

¹¹ However, later in *On the Jews*, though without specifically mentioning the poisoned wells, Luther said he believed the Jews were guilty of worse deeds than the stories from the Middle Ages indicated. He wrote, "Their cursing alone convicts them, so that we are indeed compelled to believe all the evil things written about them" (p289). He reasoned that if they were capable of that much, they were capable of worse: "Their prayers and curses furnish evidence," he wrote, "as do the

many stories which relate to their torturing of children and all sorts of crimes for which they have often been burned at the stake or banished. Therefore I firmly believe that they say and practice far worse things secretly than the histories and others record about them" (p288).

¹² Joseph Serge, "Martin Luther and the Holocaust," Canadian Jewish News. (www.cjnews.com/.../martin-luther-and-the-holocaust, accessed March 14, 2021.)

¹³ I have substituted "Yeshu" where Sherman had "Jesu" in this quotation. The appellation "Jesu" was commonly used in Old and Early Modern English, as well as in German, due to the influence of Latin and the Latin Vulgate Bible. Latin drops the "s" in certain grammatical cases, such as the vocative ("Christ Jesu our Lord") and the genitive ("the cross of Jesu"). To put "Jesu" here, in a modern English translation, improperly conflates the beloved English name with the insulting Hebrew one. In English or German, the appellation "Jesu" should not be viewed in a negative light.

¹⁴ I discussed the Hebrew abbreviation to "Yeshu" with Ben Mizrahi. He confirmed that this is a well-known and deliberate insult or curse. The semantics are complicated, but it began as an acronym for a Hebrew expression that means "may his name and memory be obliterated." He advised also that orthodox Jews have another word for Jesus, which means "that man," and which is used in modern Israel. He has heard that some Jews believe they should spit on the ground at the mention of "that man," but he has never seen this.

¹⁵ Mr. Mizrahi informed me about *Toledot Yeshu*. He said Luther was aware that this booklet was circulating in Germany and was worried about it.

¹⁶ *Toledot Yeshu* has recently (2011) been translated into English by Peter Schäfer. The Amazon description reads, "One of the most controversial books in history, *Toledot Yeshu* recounts the life story of Jesus from a negative and anti-Christian perspective. It ascribes to Jesus an illegitimate birth, a theft of the Ineffable Name of God, heretical activities, and, finally, a disgraceful death. Perhaps for centuries, the *Toledot Yeshu* circulated orally until it coalesced into various literary forms. Although the dates of these written compositions remain obscure, some early hints of a Jewish counter-history of Jesus can be found in the works of pagan and Christian authors of Late Antiquity, such as Celsus, Justin, and Tertullian." (Amazon.com, book description for *Toledot Yeshu*, accessed April 17, 2021.)

Schäfer also published another book, *Jesus in the Talmud*. The Amazon description for this book reads, "Scattered throughout the Talmud, the founding document of rabbinic Judaism in late antiquity, can be found quite a few references to Jesus--and they're not flattering. In this lucid, richly detailed, and accessible book, Peter Schäfer examines how the rabbis of the Talmud read, understood, and used the New Testament Jesus narrative to assert, ultimately, Judaism's superiority over Christianity. The Talmudic stories make fun of Jesus' birth from a virgin, fervently contest his claim to be the Messiah and Son of God, and maintain that he was rightfully executed as a blasphemer and idolater. They subvert the Christian idea of Jesus' resurrection and insist he got the punishment he deserved in hell--and that a similar fate awaits his followers." (Amazon.com, book description for *Jesus in the Talmud*, accessed April 17, 2021.)

From what I have seen, I would not recommend Schäfer's work. His book descriptions recount the Talmudic rather glibly – besides which, no Christian would want to read them. Further, the description for *Jesus in the Talmud* has this paragraph, which ends with a Shermanesque comparison to Christians: "Schäfer contends that these [Jewish] stories betray a remarkable familiarity with the Gospels--especially Matthew and John--and represent a deliberate and sophisticated anti-Christian polemic that parodies the New Testament narratives. He carefully distinguishes between Babylonian and Palestinian sources, arguing that the rabbis' proud and self-confident counter

message to that of the evangelists was possible only in the unique historical setting of Persian Babylonia, in a Jewish community that lived in relative freedom. The same could not be said of Roman and Byzantine Palestine, where the Christians aggressively consolidated their political power and the Jews therefore suffered." (Ibid.)

¹⁷ The uncomfortable affinity between Judaism and Islam extends to places of worship. Mr. Mizrahi informed me that orthodox Jews are willing to pray and worship in an Islamic mosque, but never in a Christian church. However, the present Palestinian-Israeli conflict has discouraged the Jews from praying in mosques.

¹⁸ It can be difficult to find other translations of *On the Jews and Their Lies*. There was an edition revised by Thomas Dalton; also, Texe Marrs produced an edition with a new foreword. I do not know if or to what extent either of these relied on the Concordia House translation. Neither came up as available for purchase in my Amazon.com search.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, "On War Against the Turk," ed. Theodore G. Tappert, *Selected Writings of Martin Luther*, Vol. 4 (1529-1546) (Canada: Fortress Press, 2007), 27.

²⁰ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," Vol. 4, *Luther's Works*, A.E., 203.

²¹ Ibid., 214.

²² See Davis, Ruth M., *The Story of the Matthew Bible, Part 2: The Scriptures Then and Now* (Canada: Baruch House, 2020), 87-88 and 108n.

²³ That Luther opened his home generously to the needy is well known. One example only concerns the black plague that struck Wittenberg in August 1527. Luther taught at the university there, and that same month the Elector John ordered Luther and other professors at the university to leave Wittenberg. Luther refused. He said the duty of a pastor by God's command is to be a good shepherd, not a hireling who flees. He remained to care for the sick and their families, and he opened an improvised hospital in his own home. By mid-August there were already eighteen deaths in Wittenberg, and the mayor's wife died almost in his arms. Concerning those who care for the sick, Luther wrote, "It is proved by experience that those who nurse the sick with love, devotion, and sincerity are generally protected. Though they are poisoned, they are not harmed. ... Whoever serves the sick for the sake of God's gracious promise ... has the great assurance that he shall in turn be cared for. God himself shall be his attendant and his physician." And indeed, Luther and his family were spared during the plague. (See "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague," Vol. 43, *Luther's Works*, A.E., 113f. This quotation is at page 129.)