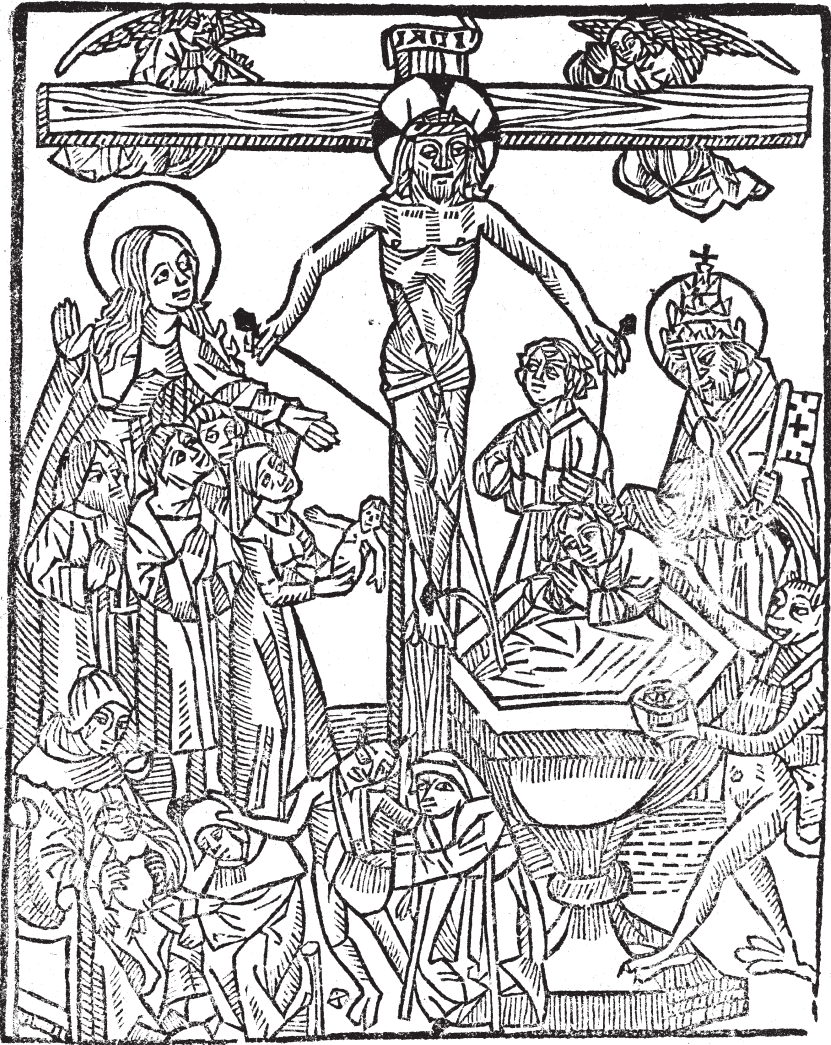


# Introduction



An anti-Jewish image from Johannes Pfefferkorn, *Mirror of the Jews* [*Speculum adhortationis iudaice ad Christum*] (Cologne: Martin von Werden, 1507).

# Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People

*Brooks Schramm*

On October 31, 2017, the city of Lutherstadt Wittenberg and Lutherans throughout the world will commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the posting of Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. The years leading up to this commemoration have been designated by the Evangelical Protestant Church in Germany as the Luther Decade. This date will mark a significant milestone for Lutherans specifically and for Protestants in general. It is also an opportune moment to revisit a grim problem at the heart of Lutheran (and Protestant) origins, that of *Luther and the Jews*.

## **Why This Book?**

The place, significance, and influence of Martin Luther in the long history of Christian anti-Jewish polemic has been and continues to be a contested issue. The literature on the subject is substantial and diverse. While efforts to absolve Luther as simply a man of his times—as one who merely passed on and perpetuated what he himself had already received from his cultural and theological tradition—have generally been jettisoned, there still persists even among the educated public the perception that the truly problematic aspects of Luther's anti-Jewish attitudes are confined to the final stages of his career. To be sure, one can speak of an intensification of anti-Jewish rhetoric toward the end of his life—especially with regard to the question of what should be done about the Jews—but Luther's *theological* evaluation of Judaism and the Jewish people remains essentially unchanged from the earliest stages of his career. This has been bluntly articulated by Oberman: "The basis of Luther's anti-Judaism was the conviction that ever since Christ's appearance on earth, the Jews have had no more future as Jews."<sup>1</sup>

Related to this static aspect of Luther's thought is the significance of it. When one reads Luther with a careful eye toward "the Jewish question" (and without a predisposition to exonerate him), it becomes apparent that, far from being tangential, the

Jews are rather a central, core component of his thought and that this was the case throughout his career, not only at the end. If this is in fact so, then it follows that it is essentially impossible to understand the heart and building blocks of Luther's theology (justification, faith, salvation, grace, freedom, Law and Gospel, and so on) without acknowledging the crucial role played by "the Jews" in his fundamental thinking.

Luther was indeed constrained by ideas, images, and superstitions regarding the Jews and Judaism that he inherited from medieval Christian tradition, but the engine in the development of his theological thought as it relates to the Jews is his biblical hermeneutics, in particular his Old Testament hermeneutics. It is not commonly appreciated that Luther the university professor lectured far more on the Old Testament than he did on the New. Just as "the Jewish question" is a central, core component of his thought, so biblical interpretation—and especially Old Testament interpretation—is the primary arena in which essential claims about the Jews and Judaism are formulated and developed. To a degree, this sets him apart from much of the theological tradition that had preceded him. Luther's anti-Judaism is predominantly biblically based and biblically driven, rather than culturally or socially based, and this aspect of his thinking vis-à-vis the Jews has had no small impact on subsequent Lutheran biblical interpretation.

No contemporary study of the history of Christian attitudes toward and teaching about Judaism can avoid its own post-Holocaust context. It affects the questions we ask of historical documents, persons, and events, as well as why we ask them. It may even contribute to why we are interested in certain historical matters at all. The Holocaust has forever changed the rules of engagement for all matters Jewish-Christian. On the other hand, a developed historical consciousness also reminds us that there are no straight lines in history. History is too complex—and too capricious—to tolerate the imposition of arguments of historical inevitability. Luther, for example, did not make the *Führer* inevitable. But history can teach broad lessons, and especially the history of Christian Europe. When seen in this light, Luther takes his place alongside that legion of Christian thinkers and leaders—both before and after him—that forcefully advocated and participated in the expulsion or deportation of Jews. Over the course of his career, Luther came to the conclusion that Christian and Jewish coexistence could not be achieved, nor should it be. In addition, no reasonable reading of Luther can avoid the conclusion that his statements and beliefs about the Jews further contributed to their dehumanization by Christians, both in thought and in practice. Despite the revolutionary religious, social, and political character of "Luther's Reformation," it did nothing to make matters any better for the lives of actual European Jews. In terms of Luther's immediate legacy in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Kaufmann has gone so far as to say: "At the level of confessionally distinct identities, 'Lutheran' could be the same as 'anti-Jewish.'"<sup>2</sup> Contemporary Lutheran Christians, and indeed any Christian who has

been positively affected by Luther's courageous articulation of the gospel, have a moral obligation to reckon with how Luther sounded—and sounds—to Jewish ears.

With the above issues in mind, and with a desire to participate in the broader ongoing and constructive conversations on the roots of different faith traditions and the relevance of the teachers of yesterday for today's world, this volume is offered as a textbook for theological and religious education. For the sake of accountability and honest exploration of matters that matter, this book is intended to assist students in diverse settings, especially in seminary contexts and departments of religion, to begin to come to terms with material that is difficult but timelessly pertinent, as it invites re-exploration of the basic tenets of Christian faith. It is also offered out of the conviction that such re-exploration is integral to formation in ministry and to the identity of the church and its believers. The explicit focus on Luther is warranted for many reasons, but it is perhaps stated most poignantly by Oberman: "The terrible tragedy of the relationship between the Jews and Christians in world history can be studied in concentrated form in the history of this one man."<sup>3</sup>

### **What Luther Knew and Thought of Judaism**

There are few subjects historically that Christians have written more about—and known less about—than Judaism, and perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Martin Luther. He had neither Jewish conversation partners nor Jewish friends. His knowledge of Judaism was primarily dependent on what he read, and those readings were dominated by overtly anti-Jewish treatises, some of which were written by Christians and some by Jewish converts. Though classical Jewish texts were becoming widely available to Christian scholars during the time of Luther's academic career, by his own admission he was not in position to handle these texts for himself. Thus his descriptions of Judaism and Jewish thought are partial truths and caricatures, though there is no reason to suspect that he himself did not regard them as factual. Ironically, if Luther had learned more about Judaism, it likely would have made no real difference to him. For example, when in 1530 the Jewish convert Anthonius Margaritha translated substantial portions of the Jewish daily liturgy into German, Luther found in these prayers confirmation for his own unflinching anti-Jewish stance.<sup>4</sup>

Where the Jews are concerned, Luther sees a rupture between the Judaism of biblical times and that of post-biblical times, that is, the time prior to the coming of the Christ and the time during and after his coming. The significance of this crucial distinction is captured on the first page of Bornkamm's classic study: "Luther's quarrel with the Judaism of his day must not be treated as a repudiation of the Old Testament. To do so would prevent any understanding of what the Old Testament meant to him. Luther made a clear and sharp distinction between the two. No one who has even superficially looked into [Luther's] writings can doubt his passionate

opposition to the Jews as blasphemers of Christ on the one hand, and his deep love for the Old Testament on the other. He had no difficulty maintaining both, as paradoxical as this may appear to some people today.”<sup>5</sup>

The watershed moment for Luther—that is, that which brings about the distinction—is the overwhelming and ongoing no of the Jews (the Old Testament people of God) to Jesus as the Christ. Few Christian thinkers have been more genuinely troubled, even tormented, by this no than was Luther. Over his entire career he struggled to find a plausible explanation to account for how it could be. Like most before him, he regarded the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 CE as the strict judgment of God visited on the Jews for the crucifixion of Christ, and the interminable exile of the Jews, which by Luther’s time was approaching 1,500 years, became for him definitive proof that God had cast them off and that they were—obviously—no longer the people of God.

Though he never tires of taunting<sup>6</sup> the Jews in his writings with the “1,500 years” argument, it is not difficult to perceive that Luther himself was terrified by what he knew of Jewish life in the European diaspora. Being landless, always vulnerable to persecution and expulsion, and lacking any clear word from God regarding the end of their exile—all of these embodied for Luther what it looks like to live life under the wrath of God. It was *unthinkable* to him that the promises of the biblical prophets could have remained unfulfilled for so long, as the Jews claimed, because this contradicted his most basic convictions about the nature of God. Luther certainly believed that God on occasion punishes God’s own people, even severely; the biblical record is too clear on this issue. But God would not—*could not*—punish the Jews in the way they are being punished if they were still God’s own people. The only tenable explanation for him was that the promises of the prophets had passed to another people. Otherwise God would be a liar.

Luther was honestly baffled by how the Jews could continue to deny the reason for their miserable 1,500-year exile, especially when the witness of Scripture was so evident to him. Over the course of his career, he would come to the conclusion that the only thing, finally, that could explain it was that they had been handed over by God to the Devil. Thus their resistance to the gospel—and their resistance to admitting *the* reason for their exile—was willful and unforgiveable. Though it was not typical of Luther, this thoroughgoing demonization of the Jews led late in his career to the dredging up and repeating of scurrilous accusations, to the effect that it was in the nature of Jews to want to kill Christians. A particularly repulsive example comes from his 1544 Lenten lectures on Isaiah 53. Commenting on Isa. 53:8, the verse that speaks of the death of the Servant of the Lord, Luther (echoing the centuries old blood-libel accusation) states: “The Jews still kill Christ daily, not in the sense that they merely desire to do so, but rather in fact. For they slaughter many Christian infants and children. In short, they are killers forever.”<sup>7</sup>

Of all of the theological charges that Luther levels against the Jews, the most consistently recurring one has to do with the issue of chosenness, that is, the Jewish claim to be the chosen people of God based upon physical descent from Abraham. Luther readily grants that the Jews are indeed Abraham's physical descendants but that they have consistently misconstrued the nature of God's promise to Abraham. For Luther, the promise to Abraham's seed was in reality the promise of the Seed, that is, the Messiah/Christ (Gen. 3:15). The physical seed of Abraham, the Jews, were God's chosen instrument in Old Testament times to bear that promise. But Abraham's true descendants/seed, even in Old Testament times, were always those who believed in the promise of the Messiah and not those who relied on their physical descent. This is the fundamental error, and sin, of the Jews, who trust as it were that they have been born into grace, that they are bound to God by birth, and thus that God owes them God's benevolence. For Luther, this constitutes a theological obscenity, because the grace and benevolence of God can *only* be accessed by faith, and it has never been otherwise. The only thing the human being (the Jew included) is born into is sin. The human being has nothing of its own that can be held up to God, and certainly not its own birth. God owes the human being nothing. The Jewish claim of chosenness, therefore, becomes the quintessential example of what Luther means by "boasting in the flesh," and it is at the root of his understanding of Judaism as a purely carnal religion that knows nothing of the spiritual or the eternal.

This boast of the Jews then carries with it two corollaries that Luther pursues with vigor. The first is the completely exclusive character of Jewish chosenness. If the Jews are God's chosen people, then it follows that everyone else is damned, Luther included. The second corollary follows immediately from the first: If the Jews claim salvation exclusively for themselves, then they are by definition despisers of the rest of humanity, and ultimately *μισάνθρωποι* (misanthropes).<sup>8</sup> The misanthropic character of Jewish life and hope crystalizes for Luther around Jewish messianic expectation, which, as he understands it, longs for the messianic annihilation of all the Gentiles, and such longing is illustrated by the love the Jews have for the book of Esther, a book that he particularly detested.

These are of course radically serious charges, but Luther was equally radical in his conviction of their veracity. To be fair to him, Luther was not making these charges up out of thin air. Since at least the twelfth century there had indeed developed in European Jewish circles a strident anti-Christian literature, which satirized Christian beliefs, attacked Christian exegesis, and longed for the destruction of the enemies of the Jewish people.<sup>9</sup> Aspects of this anti-Christian polemic had filtered down to Luther, and he was acutely offended by it. But beyond the offense he experienced, Luther came to believe—and teach—that the most extreme anti-Christian positions articulated by Jews (in the wake of the Crusades, no less!) were definitive of Jewish thought as such, and this without regard to the increasingly desperate situations

that had contributed to the rise of this type of literature in the first place. Pertinent here is the argument of Alex Bein: “With regard to Luther’s accusation (and that of many later enemies of the Jews) to the effect that the Jews ridiculed among themselves—both orally and in numerous writings—Jesus and Mary or insulted them with shameful names, it can be said—in spite of the contrary claims of Jewish apologists past and present—that the accusation is in principle true. But how could it have been otherwise, given the polarity of the respective views and given the inhuman treatment that the Jews had received from ‘Christian love-of-neighbor’?”<sup>10</sup>

The picture of the Jew and of Judaism that thus emerges in Luther’s thought is not a pretty one. While other leading sixteenth-century reformers also wrote against the Jews, Luther outpaced them all both quantitatively and “qualitatively.” Though no single explanation can account for this phenomenon, the sheer fact itself highlights the centrality of the Jew in Luther’s mind. Thus Kaufmann can write that “[t]he Jews represented for Luther the opposite of what it meant to be a Christian or what it ought to mean.”<sup>11</sup> Kaufmann’s words are consistent with the equally broad claim made by Maurer in his landmark study of over a half-century ago: for Luther, “[t]he post-biblical Jew is the archetype of the human being standing in opposition to God.”<sup>12</sup> If the Jew is archetypal of the human condition vis-à-vis God, then it follows that the ultimate human problem that Christ and the gospel have to remedy is the Jew inside us all. Thus for Luther, and this is the case throughout his career, the Jew—and Judaism—represent the negative religious standard against which all other negative religious phenomena are finally measured.<sup>13</sup>

One does not have to read far in Luther to encounter his unholy threesome of “the Jew, the Pope, and the Turk” as the prime enemies of the gospel. Given the frequency of the recurrence of this phrase, and especially given the similarity of language that Luther uses to attack all three members of the group, the criticism is occasionally made that attempts to isolate the question of “Luther and the Jews” are misguided and that the “Jewish question” therefore should not be privileged.<sup>14</sup> Without minimizing Luther’s anti-Papist or anti-Turkish language, we follow that line of Luther scholarship that nevertheless argues for a qualitative distinction where the Jews are concerned, which for us turns on three points. The first has already been made above, in regard to the archetypal or prototypical role that the Jews play in Luther’s thought. The second is similar. For Luther, the Jews were the first enemies of the gospel, and their hostility has never ceased. The current Popes, and certainly the Turks, are relative late-comers in the battle against Christ and the gospel. In Luther’s view of church history, the gospel has its sworn enemies in every generation, and he did come to believe that the Pope and the Turk were in fact the final apocalyptic enemy, the Antichrist. But the Jews are once again distinct, because they and they alone have the character of being the *perennial* enemies of the gospel.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, they share that role only with the Devil himself.



There is a third point, however, that is decisive for us, and that is the question of social location. The Pope was the most religiously powerful person in Europe. Luther's rhetorical attacks against him took true courage, placed his life in real jeopardy, and resulted in a strict geographical confinement for most of his career. The Turk had a mighty army, and though the threat to Germany was genuine, it nevertheless remained at a distance. Luther's writings against him did not have the slightest effect upon him. But for the Jews of Germany and neighboring lands, Luther was "a player." Both through his writings and his personal influence on Protestant princes, Luther helped to make the lives of his Jewish contemporaries more precarious and influenced the imaginations of subsequent generations of Lutherans toward Jews in numerous deleterious ways.<sup>16</sup> The issue at stake is not whether Luther was the most virulent anti-Jewish Christian writer ever—he wasn't. Nor is it whether he said equally repulsive things about other groups—he did. It is rather about the precariousness of the Jewish social situation. All three of these points when taken together warrant an explicit focus on *Luther and the Jews*.

In light of the derogatory and hostile views described above, there may seem to be a contradiction with what is often referred to as the "Jew-friendly" side of Luther, as expressed most notably in his treatise of 1523, *That Jesus Christ Was born a Jew*.<sup>17</sup> But it is only a seeming contradiction. At no point in his career does Luther ever express hope for the Jew as Jew. Judaism is a dead religion, and Luther makes no distinction between Judaism and those who practice it, the Jews.<sup>18</sup> What he says about one applies to the other. What he does express, in varying degrees, is a hope for the Jew to become a Christian. The phrase "Jew-friendly Luther" only makes sense if it refers to the degree of openness to or optimism about Jewish conversion to Christianity. Even as early as his lectures on Romans (1515–1516), he expresses skepticism about readings of Romans 11 to the effect that all Jews would convert at the end of time, and by the end of his career he would reject this reading altogether. In the early 1520's, however, he does go through a period when he manifests significant optimism toward the prospect of the conversion of a number of Jews. But this optimism was to be short-lived, and already by the mid-1520's it disappears and never returns. What does remain roughly consistent is his conviction, expressed most noticeably in his commentary on the *Magnificat* (June 1521), that there will always be Christians, however few, among Abraham's seed, and that therefore, in so far as possible, Christians should treat Jews in a kindly manner.<sup>19</sup>

Ironically, it is the period of Luther's greatest optimism regarding Jewish conversions that also highlights his thoroughgoing negative evaluation of Jews and Judaism. While in hiding on the Wartburg and virtually at the same time as he wrote his *Magnificat* commentary, he also wrote a commentary on *Psalms 68* (May 1521). The latter was motivated by the liturgical use of portions of the psalm during the festivals of Ascension and Pentecost. Within the space of one month, the same person who

wrote that the Jews should be treated in a kindly manner in hopes of their conversion also wrote the following about Ps. 68:21, “But God will shatter the heads of his enemies, the hairy crown of him who walks in his guilty ways”:

It is known well enough that the Jews have at all times been Christ’s greatest enemies, their claim to be God’s most loyal friends notwithstanding. It is undeniable that this verse chronicles their fate: their head is shattered; they no longer have a kingdom, a government, a priesthood. Soon after Christ’s ascent they lost that head and never regained it, which is the result of but one crime, namely, their hostility to Christ and their refusal to let Him be God. . . . All this is the consequence of their refusal to believe in Him who takes away both sin and death, and of their persistence to remain in their guilty ways, as our text declares. To be sure, they are not aware of their sin or of the reason for their total destruction. In times past they had experienced repeated captivity; but still they had always retained their head and government, or at least a prophet or priest. Never before have they been shorn as bald as after Christ’s ascension.<sup>20</sup>

Luther’s unrelenting negativity toward Judaism and those who practice it, the Jews, never changed. His legacy in this regard is summarized by Osten-Sacken: “Luther’s anti-Jewish writings belong . . . in the front row of treatises, speeches, and sermons delivered against the Jews in all of church history.”<sup>21</sup>

## The Roots of Luther’s Anti-Judaism

### Luther and the Old Testament

The corpus of Luther’s collected works reaches beyond one hundred large volumes and is still not complete. The size of the collection and its numerous literary genres can have the effect of obscuring what was at the heart of Luther’s life-work, namely, his academic lectures on books and portions of books of the Bible at the University of Wittenberg, which spanned a thirty-two-year period of time. Though Luther’s academic title was *Professor in Biblia*, he devoted only three or four years to lectures on New Testament books (Romans, Galatians [twice], and Hebrews) while the remainder were completely given over to the Old Testament. The course of the lectures was as follows:<sup>22</sup>

1513–1515	First Psalms Lectures ( <i>Dictata super Psalterium</i> )
1515–1516	Romans
1516–1517	Galatians
1517–1518	Hebrews
1518–1521	Second Psalms Lectures ( <i>Operationes in Psalmos</i> )
1523–1525	Deuteronomy

1524–1526	The Twelve Minor Prophets
1526	Ecclesiastes
1528–1530	Isaiah
1530–1531	Song of Songs
1531	Galatians
1532–1535	Psalms 2; 45; 51; 90; 120–134
1535–1545	Genesis
1543/1544	Isaiah 9
1544	Isaiah 53

While so much of what Luther wrote was dictated by ecclesiastical and political circumstance, these biblical lectures represent his own free choices, and thus reveal something essential about his own theological orientation as intently focused on the Old Testament and its interpretation.

His engagement with the Old Testament, however, was not limited to the lecture hall. He preached sixty-two sermons on Genesis (1523–1524), sixty-five on Exodus (1524–1526), thirty-two on Leviticus and Numbers (1527–1528), and seventeen on Deuteronomy (1529). He wrote numerous commentaries or expositions on Psalms and collections of Psalms, and several of his polemical treatises are centered on Old Testament texts or themes. And last but not least was the Old Testament translation project that involved Luther and his team of translators (“The Wittenberg Sanhedrin”) for twelve years (1523–1534) and then on to the end of his life as the translation was subsequently revised.

By any estimation, therefore, the Old Testament and its proper interpretation were at the core of Luther’s thought. For our purposes, however, the crucial issue was noted by the great Jewish scholar, Salo Baron, in stating that “Luther’s lifetime preoccupation with the Old Testament made him, on the whole, less rather than more friendly to contemporary Jews.”<sup>23</sup> Why this was the case is directly anchored in the way Luther insisted that the Old Testament should be read by Christians. By way of initial orientation to the question, one would be hard-pressed to find a more precise yet concise description than that offered by Christopher Brown:

Luther’s sharp theological condemnation of contemporary Judaism and severe practical proposals for expulsion of Jewish “blasphemers” cannot be separated from the long history of Christian-Jewish relations. But for Luther, the conflict was made all the more bitter—but also redirected from traditional avenues—by the distinctive features of his theology. The significance of exegetical disagreements was magnified by Luther’s own very high theological estimation of the Hebrew Scriptures—his own *métier* as a professor—and his belief that Christianity came not as a replacement for an incomplete or false religion contained in

the Jewish Old Testament, but as the continuation and full manifestation of the Gospel of the promised Seed that had been preached and believed by all the patriarchs and prophets throughout the Hebrew Scripture.<sup>24</sup>

### Old Testament Interpretation

Luther inherited from his medieval forebears the tradition of interpreting biblical texts, and especially Old Testament texts, according to a fourfold meaning (literal, allegorical, tropological, anagogical), which, theoretically, tended to correspond to the historical meaning, the meaning for the church, the meaning for the individual, and the eschatological meaning. This fourfold meaning was actually an elaboration upon the ancient church's twofold distinction between the literal and the spiritual, with the spiritual now being subdivided into three levels. In both the ancient and medieval church, the term allegory could be used in a general way to refer to any nonliteral reading of a text. The relationship between Luther and medieval exegesis, as he developed as an interpreter, is exceedingly complex. Though it has often been portrayed as a rupture, that is clearly too strong as evidenced by the fact that he continued to use allegory throughout his career.

What he did do, however, was seek to simplify the interpretation of the Bible. This is seen most directly in his conviction, already evident by 1518–1519, that biblical texts rightly ought to have one proper or legitimate meaning.<sup>25</sup> As long as there was agreement on this proper or legitimate meaning as the foundation, Luther had no problem whatsoever in bringing other interpretations to enhance or illustrate it. But in addition, the proper or legitimate meaning served to limit other readings, that is, readings that he regarded as utterly fanciful or in no way related to the legitimate meaning. Thus simplification and limitation are important terms for understanding Luther's approach to biblical interpretation vis-à-vis his forebears.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Luther was actually quite flexible when it came to the issue of the "application" of a text to the present day. Because he was convinced that Scripture, when properly understood, was a living thing, it could speak in concretely different ways in different times and places. He never made any claim to have exhausted the potential applications of Scripture.

In terms of the relationship between the Old Testament and Judaism, three aspects of Luther's thought are all-determinative. The first has to do with the most basic of all Christian theological claims: the messiahship of Jesus. Or, *Jesus Christ*. More precisely, it is the conviction that the Christ proclaimed in the New Testament is the same Christ promised in numerous passages in the Old Testament, and—in addition—that this equivalence of the one promised and the one proclaimed can be *proven* by the proper interpretation of these key Old Testament texts. In this regard there is nothing new or unique in Luther, as his primary proof-texts are essentially the same as those used by Justin Martyr and Tertullian already in the second century

and which were consistently used by Christians against the Jews ever since. What is characteristic of Luther, however, is his seeming need to argue this point against the Jews over and over and over again. Why? A reasonable answer is that Luther perceived in Jewish readings of the Old Testament a genuine threat. Precisely because this was for him the most basic of all theological issues—that Jesus *is* the Messiah promised in the Old Testament—it had to be sustained otherwise the entire edifice would collapse. From Luther's perspective, Jewish interpretation represented an assault on the very foundations of Christianity itself. This also helps to explain why he was so harsh toward his Christian contemporaries who were making use of Jewish readings of the Old Testament, because he was convinced that these Christian interpreters were sawing off the limb on which they themselves were sitting. For Luther, there could be no compromise on this most basic of all theological issues. Jewish interpreters, and Christians who interpreted like Jews, had to be attacked and defeated on the Old Testament battlefield, because *everything*, from a religious point of view, was at stake.<sup>27</sup>

The second aspect flows directly from the first. For Luther, the Old Testament—properly understood—is a Christian book, and the two volumes of the Christian Bible, therefore, constitute a theological unity. This is what enables him to speak of the church as being present already in the Old Testament and to speak of certain Old Testament characters as Christians. What binds the two volumes of the Christian Bible together is the promise of the coming of the Messiah and faith in that promise. For Luther, the faith of the Old Testament and the faith of the New Testament are the same, and thus the criteria for determining who are and are not the people of God are also the same. The only significant distinction is that Old Testament Christians trust in the One who *will* come, while New Testament Christians trust in the one who *has* come. Luther can even say that Old Testament faith was actually superior to New Testament faith, because the saints of the Old Testament trusted, contrary to all appearances, in a *pure* promise. Once one recognizes Luther's understanding of the Old Testament as a Christian book—not by adoption but in its essence—then another claim of his, which on the surface seems quite peculiar, makes sense. This is his idea that when a Jew converts to Christianity the Jew is actually *returning* to the faith of his/her forebears, that is, to the faith of the Old Testament. And this in turn is consistent with his broader understanding that the New Testament and Christianity represent theological continuity with the Old Testament, while rabbinic Judaism and rabbinic texts are in complete theological discontinuity; in fact they are an utter aberration.

The third aspect has to do with Luther's use of Old Testament curse and judgment language. Aside from the strictly christological proof-texts, it is in these areas where much of his anti-Jewish polemic emerges. The Old Testament itself does in fact place strong emphasis on the infidelity and disobedience of ancient Israel over

against God, as well as the judgment that such behavior incurs. But it also emphasizes, by way of counter argument, God's eternal love for and fidelity toward Israel. In Luther's treatment of Old Testament judgment language, he seeks, on the one hand, to discern which passages apply to Israel in its ancient historical context, and, on the other, which are genuinely prophetic and thus apply to Israel at the time of the coming of Christ, and beyond. Once this distinction has been made, then anything that falls into the latter category can be used against the Jews as condemnation for their rejection of Jesus as Messiah. Though this area of Luther's thought still requires significant scholarly attention, one thing is clear: in theological terms much of the worst of what Luther had to say about the Jews occurs in the context of his wrestling with Old Testament judgment language, for it was precisely there that he found the shocking possibility that God can cast off God's own people.

### **The Problem of the Hebrew Bible: "The Rabbis"**

An obvious problem for Luther, and indeed for anyone who wants to argue for the theological unity of the Christian Bible, is the fact that the Old Testament is written in a language wholly unrelated to the Greek New Testament. As a young scholar, Luther made himself a student of biblical Hebrew, and he continued to work with the language until the end of his life. He was an expert Latinist and he also had fine Greek skills, but by his own admission his competence in biblical Hebrew did not approach that of his Greek and much less his Latin. This did not deter him, however, from often making very bold theological claims based on his (faulty) understanding of certain nuances of the Hebrew language.

An even more significant problem for Luther was his discovery of the Jewish interpretive tradition. What he actually knew of rabbinic interpretation, and how he knew it, has still not been resolved satisfactorily. From early to mid-career, Luther's primary conduit into rabbinic learning (essentially Rashi [1040–1105]) was the biblical commentaries of Nicholas of Lyra (1270–1349), as well as the "Additions" to Lyra by the Jewish convert, Paul of Burgos (1351–1435). In late career, Luther had access to Sebastian Münster's diglot Hebrew-Latin Bible with annotations (1534/1535), a work of immense learning that drew on numerous medieval Jewish commentators not well represented in Lyra or Burgos. Though the Wittenberg translation team had available to it a copy of the *Second Rabbinic Bible* (1525), there can be no question of Luther reading Hebrew and Aramaic rabbinic texts for himself in systematic fashion. His own firsthand engagement with this literature was selective at best.<sup>28</sup> Be that as it may, Luther was convinced that he knew more than enough about rabbinic interpretation, and over the course of his career he developed a visceral antipathy toward "the rabbis." Already by the mid-1520's, he had concluded that they were the central instruments of the ongoing Jewish resistance to the gospel, and his *Genesis Lectures* (1535–1545) are saturated with anti-rabbinic

polemic. His most consistent critique of the rabbis is that while they can be helpful to Christians in matters of Hebrew grammar, they know nothing of theology, that is, the subject matter of the text. For example, in 1536 while lecturing on the story of Cain and Abel, he states:

[T]he rabbis distort the meaning of Scripture almost everywhere. Therefore I am beginning to hate them and to advise that those who read them read with careful judgment. Although they had in their possession certain facts through tradition from the patriarchs, they nevertheless corrupted these facts in various ways. Consequently, they often deceived Jerome too. The poets have not filled the world with their fabrications to the extent to which the ungodly Jews have filled Scripture with their silly opinions. Hence it causes us much work to keep our text free from their misleading comments. . . . The reason for their going astray is that they are indeed familiar with the language but have no knowledge of the subject matter; that is, they are not theologians. Therefore they are compelled to twaddle and to crucify both themselves and Scripture. How is it possible to judge correctly about things that are unknown?<sup>29</sup>

For Luther, the strict corollary of such anti-rabbinic polemic is the folly of Christian interpreters who allow themselves to be influenced theologically by the rabbis. The sixteenth century was the age of the birth of Christian Hebraism, that intellectual movement within Christianity that sought and eventually gained expertise not only in biblical Hebrew but also in the Hebrew and Aramaic of classic rabbinic sources and in their systems of thought, as well as in the great medieval Jewish biblical commentators. Luther's scholarly career spanned the beginnings of this movement, and he himself benefited from it and, to a limited extent, contributed to it. But when it came to matters of theology, Luther adopted a rigidly antagonistic stance. In his infamous anti-Jewish treatise, *On the Ineffable Name* (March 1543), he makes his position crystal clear:

On pain of losing divine grace and eternal life, it is forbidden for us Christians to believe or regard as right the scriptural interpretations and glosses of the rabbis. We are, however, permitted to read them in order to see what kind of damned Devil's work they're up to, and so protect ourselves from it. For thus says Moses in Deut. 28{:28}: "God will strike you with madness, blindness, and frenzy of heart." Moses did not say this about the cursed Goyim but rather about his circumcised saints, the noble blood, the princes of heaven and earth, who call themselves Israel. Thereby all of their interpretations, glosses, and exegesis of Scripture are damned by God himself as nothing more than pure madness, blindness, and frenzy. God himself regards and judges all of their labor over Scripture these past 1500 years as not only false and lies, but also pure blindness and a frenzied, mad thing.<sup>30</sup>

In February of 1537, while on a trip to Smalcald, Luther was ill with a terrible bout of kidney stones, in fact so ill that he thought he was dying. Among the several statements that were recorded at his bedside, one reveals something vital about Luther's own self-understanding: "I'll be and I'll die an enemy of all the enemies of my Christ."<sup>31</sup> As the 1543 statement above shows, not only the rabbis but also those Christian interpreters who follow them in matters theological are high on the list of those regarded by Luther as "the enemies of my Christ."



Woodcut of a Jewish money-lender from the title page of Luther's sermon on usury, *Eyn Sermon von dem Wücher*, 1520.