# An Abandonment of Hope: Martin Luther and the Jews

JASON MARTIN

In his monumental work *Mein Kampf* Adolf Hitler classifies Martin Luther as one of the great statesmen and reformers of history. Hitler believed that Luther's contemporaries neither appreciated his great idealism, nor heeded his visionary voice. Hitler elevated Luther to the level of other eminent Germans like Frederick the Great and Richard Wagner.[1] The connexion between Hitler and Luther has prompted many people to be suspicious of Luther's work and wonder why Hitler so highly esteemed him. The link between the two men lies in their notorious attitudes toward the Jews. The writings of Luther probably influenced Hitler and served as a basis for his aggression against the Jewish people. Some admirers of Luther try to divorce the two men, or ignore this obvious blemish against Luther's character. Other proponents of Lutheranism cite his attitude towards the Jews as a minor flaw not worthy of debate because it can easily be rationalized by culture, circumstances or Luther's declining health. However, the severe brutality and outlandish cruelty which Luther proposed to use against the Jews appears to be more than a foible, and deserves critical re-examination.

The Jews appear frequently throughout Luther's writings, but three of his works deal extensively with these people and their beliefs. In the first of these, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, Luther defended himself against accusations that he denied the virgin birth of Christ. Luther produced this work early in his career and seemed favourably disposed toward the Jewish race. Luther also penned this treatise as a favour for the Jews because he hoped the monograph might benefit them by convincing some to return to the true faith of their ancestors, from which they had been cut off because they refused to believe in Christ. While defending his position Luther digressed at length and proposed an evangelistic model for Christians who desired to work with the Jewish people. In this he focused on the fact that the Jews were expelled from Jerusalem during the first century, and they now had to realize that the promises of God would never be fulfilled in a temporal sense.[2] Luther's obvious concern for the Jewish race makes it better to classify this work as evangelistic rather than regard it as a personal apologetic.

Luther spoke of the Jews as if they were innocent victims who had been deceived and were not fully responsible for their incorrect beliefs. He urged Christians to deal with them gently and patiently because they had been indoctrinated with false teachings concerning the humanity of Jesus. A time would come when the humanity of Jesus could be appropriately expounded from Scripture, but for the moment this doctrinal point was too harsh an initiation for the Jews. Luther suggested that the Jews be treated as newborn babes and 'suckled with milk.'[3] After they had accepted Jesus as the true Messiah, [the milk], they would be able to partake of the deeper spiritual truths, appropriately labelled 'the wine'.[4]

Luther also denounced the prevailing procedures for dealing with the Jewish race. He vehemently denounced the use of force, slandering and other foolish practices which would inevitably fail to produce converts, and he foresaw the negative consequences of continuing these practices which would ultimately undermine any evangelistic success among the Jews. Luther defended the use of usury by the Jews and blamed the German people who excluded Jews from labour, trade and fellowship which other citizens enjoyed. Luther reminded his readers that the guiding principle behind their attitude toward the Jews should be 'Christian love'.[5]

The core of Luther's attitude is clearly seen in the closing paragraph of *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew.*

> We ought, therefore, not to treat the Jews in so unkindly a spirit, for there are future Christians among them, and they are turning every day. Moreover, they alone, and not we Gentiles, have this promise, that there shall always be Christians among Abraham's seed, who acknowledge the blessed Seed, who knows how or when? As for our cause, it rests upon pure grace, with a promise of God. If we lived Christian lives, and led them with kindness to Christ, there would be the proper response. Who would desire to become a Christian when he sees Christians dealing with men in so unchristian a spirit? Not so, my dear Christians. Tell them the truth in all kindness; if they will not receive it, let them go. How many Christians are there who despise Christ, do not hear His Word, and are worse than Jews or heathen! Yet we leave them in peace and even fall down at their feet and wellnigh adore them as gods. Let this suffice for the present.[6]

Compassion and mercy permeate Luther's initial proposals for dialogue between Christians and Jews. His work is an evangelistic masterpiece which could still be used when dealing with people who are steeped in their own religious traditions. Unfortunately, however, Luther abandoned his own gracious stance later in life.

In 1538 Luther wrote *Against the Sabbatarians* as a polemic against those Christians who insisted upon a literal understanding of the Old Testament command to worship on the Sabbath. He was convinced that Jews were involved in the movement, and this prompted him to transpose his work into an attack on Jews in general and not just on Sabbatarians.

Luther argued that Jewish teaching had influenced Christians and was creating divisions among the believers concerning the proper day for worship. Since 1521 Luther had become increasingly distraught concerning his failed attempts to convert the Jewish people as a whole. This frustration prompted Luther to speak more harshly against the Jews than he had previously done.[7] In *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* Luther had referred to the Jewish doctrine concerning the Messiah as 'erroneous'.[8] In this later work he demonstrated his disgust with the Jewish view by saying, 'It only shows you how they are given to babbling and lying.'[9] Throughout his later works Luther radically altered his tone and often displayed signs of hostility towards the Jewish faith, which he referred to it as 'empty, meaningless folly.'[10]

Luther's polemic against the Jews centred around their expulsion from Jerusalem and the (unoccupied) throne of David which God had promised would never be without a king. Once he had used these arguments as a means of evangelizing the Jews, but now he began to criticize them for these same beliefs. At one time, incorrect Jewish doctrine had inspired Luther to adopt a policy of sympathy and pity toward the Jews, but now he cited these doctrines as justification for denouncing them. Luther never embraced Jewish beliefs, nor did he encourage hostility towards this race of people until late in his life.[11] Those who respect Luther's work should be cautious about justifying his anti-Semitic remarks, and those who oppose him should not allow them to discredit his contributions to Christianity.

Luther's fiercest attack on the Jews came in 1543, when he published *On the Jews and Their Lies*. The title alone expresses a radical change of opinion, and many harsh statements in the work motivated some of his contemporaries and supporters to oppose this treatise and Luther's recommendations. In his opening statement Luther branded the Jews as 'miserable and accursed people.'[12] He then explicitly announced his intention of thwarting Jewish attempts to lure Christians away from the faith and advised believers that they might be deceived by the Jews. He no longer desired dialogue with the Jews, nor did he think their conversion was a probability. As he said,'Much less do I propose to convert the Jews, for that is impossible.'[13] The optimistic outlook of Luther, seen clearly in his early writings, disintegrated into sheer contempt and pessimism. Now his words stung with vengeance as he advised other Christians to avoid any conversation with the Jews. Luther turned the expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem, once the context for evangelism, into a barb with which to antagonize the Jews, 'Listen, Jew, are you aware that Jerusalem and your sovereignty, together with your temple and priesthood have been destroyed for over 1,460 years? . . . Let the Jews bite on this nut and dispute this question as long as they wish.'[14]

Throughout his writing Luther's debate with the Jews consistently revolves around the historical fact of their expulsion from Jerusalem. He

regarded this act as an obvious judgment from God upon a race which persisted in obstinacy and rebellion. This crisis in Jewish history constituted an obstacle which no Jew could rationally refute or explain. God's absolute rejection of the Jews proved that he was no longer their God and that they were no longer his covenant people. Any effort to convert the Jews would prove futile until their unbearable misery compelled them to accept Jesus as the Messiah, but Luther seemed convinced that this time had not arrived. He abandoned all hope of converting the Jews as a people and purged his writings of evangelistic intentions. He reckoned that the Jews were wilfully oblivious to God's judgment against them.[15] Atkinson correctly demonstrates that Luther desperately sought to convert the Jews, and even his fiercest attack against them ended with a prayer.[16] The contradictory expressions in Luther's work cast shadows around his true intentions. He may have followed the custom of the times by ending the work with a standard prayer of compassion, but in his heart he possessed little, if any, true hope for the Jews. Perhaps Luther was still deeply concerned for the Jews and simply allowed strong emotions and years of frustration to control his pen.

Luther continued his polemic by enumerating various aspects of Jewish arrogance, most of which were based on their descent from Abraham. Luther analyzed many Old Testament passages which denounced Jewish pride and blamed that for many of Israel's failures. Arrogance also resulted in persecution for the Jews, yet they continued clinging to their ancestry. The renunciation of their ancestry would cause all arrogance to cease and completely undermine all Jewish doctrine. Since Jews boastfully approached God and demanded acceptance based on lineage, Luther doubted whether the Jews would ever abandon their boasting because it constituted an integral part of their daily lives.[17]

The Jews also boasted in the rite of circumcision and despised the rest of humanity because they refused to mutilate the flesh. Luther believed that the Jews would rather accuse God of lying than abandon their practice of circumcision. Luther invalidated their boast of circumcision by naming other nations which had also inherited this rite. The Jews were senseless and blind for believing that circumcision sanctified them, and they corrupted the procedure by adding requirements which were derived from Satan. Again Luther resorted to the Old Testament and defended his claim that circumcision of the flesh alone, divorced from circumcision of the heart, brings the wrath of God. Luther contended that the lying Jews realized that they alone were not the people of God, yet they stubbornly ignored their hearts and continued their futile boasting.[18]

Luther also indicted the Jews for glorying in the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Jews perceived themselves as the bride of God, yet they had become an adulterous nation. Luther boldly stated, '. . . they were a defiled bridge, yea, an incorrigible whore and an evil slut . . .'[19] In Luther's opinion, the Jews knew that God could not tolerate their boasting

and their unwarranted confidence in the law, yet they refused to humble themselves before his throne. The Jews also knew that they did not obey the law which they so deeply cherished. At the end of each section Luther warned Christians to guard against such boasting by the Jews and to remain suspect of their exaggerated lies.[20]

The Jews perpetuated their pride by boasting of the conquest of Canaan, the capture of Jerusalem and the building of the temple. God had often punished their boasting through captivities, deportations, and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, yet the Jews continued to hope that God would restore these landmarks to their previous prominence. These acts of judgment clearly declared God's displeasure with the Jews, but they refused to accept the truth. God continually warned the Jews throughout history that he would destroy their kingdom and take away their land if they persisted in disobedience, but the Jews insisted that the restoration of these gifts would validate the covenant. Luther believed that the present despair, which had persisted for nearly fifteen hundred years, should be enough to convince the Jews that their confidence in external objects was hopeless.[21]

After his long discourse against the arrogance of the Jews Luther expounded various accusations against them. He perceived all Jews as selfish individuals who desired to exclude Gentiles from the Kingdom of God; next to Satan himself the fiercest opponent of a Christian was an earnest Jew. Any good deed performed by a Jew was motivated purely by expediency and self-interest and not by genuine goodwill toward others. Earlier Luther had justified the economic practices of the Jews, but now he accused them of usury and stealing provoked by greed. Because of these evils Luther concluded that Jews should have no possessions of their own because all material goods really belonged to the Gentiles.[22] These random, speculative charges, which he failed to substantiate, reveal that Luther's attitude toward the Jews was deeply biased against them.

The most disturbing aspect of Luther's work is his specific suggestions for dealing with the Jews. The harshness of these recommendations perplex many followers of Luther and remain an enigma since they so obviously contradict the principle of Christian love. Luther believed that if Christians tolerated Jewish teaching then they also would become participants in Jewish blasphemy. He produced specific proposals for the civil and ecclesiastical authorities to follow when dealing with the Jewish people residing in the country. He spoke with obvious double-mindedness when he suggested a programme of 'sharp mercy' to convert a few Jews.[23] Luther had become so frustrated that he believed only through harshness would the Jews realize their mistakes.

Luther proposed that all synagogues and schools should be burned and the remaining cinders buried. Luther advocated these actions to glorify the Lord and to prove allegiance to God, because that way he would know that Christians did not tolerate blasphemers. Likewise, all Jewish houses

should be completely destroyed to remind them they are sojourners in the land. All religious texts and manuals should be taken away, and the teaching of every rabbi should be silenced under the penalty of death or dismemberment. Jews should no longer be allowed to travel safely on the highways. The Jews should be crippled economically by prohibiting usury and stripping all cash or treasures from them. All young Jews, male and female, should be forced into manual labour, since it was unfair for Gentiles to labour and let the Jews reap most of the profits. If any Gentile feared for his personal safety or the safety of his family the governing authority would be justified in expelling all Jewish people from the land.[24]

Luther admonished the clergy to protect their flocks, but they should not harm a Jew or seek revenge, since this task belonged to the realm of civil government. Immediately after advocating ecclesiastical mercy he said that all Jewish books and institutions should be destroyed. Blasphemous Jewish worship should not be tolerated, nor should Jews be permitted to utter the name of God in the presence of Christians. Luther believed that the Jews would continue such practices in private, so ultimately they must be exiled completely from the land to ensure the safety of Christians.[25]

The most perplexing aspect of all this is what lay behind Luther's shift in attitude. Luther himself gives us few clues, although it is obvious that he changed from evangelizing the Jews as probable converts to anathematizing them. A definite tone of economic envy can be found in Luther's works, and he seemed to think that the German people had been slighted by the economic prosperity of the Jews. His frequent comments about the wealth of the Jews expressed a deep resentment, but not one which justifies the inhumane treatment of an entire race. Luther's disappointment with the Jews was definitely rooted in their failure to embrace Jesus as the true Messiah. In 1521 he still had the idealistic vision that the Jewish masses would be converted by means of the truth which had been set free during the Reformation. Like many other young ministers throughout history, Luther's failed hopes may have developed into bitterness and deep resentment toward the Jews. Perhaps Luther projected personal disappointment with himself onto the Jews, which caused him to attack them vehemently. He may have thought that the Reformation was, in some sense, incomplete because the Jewish race had failed to embrace it.

There is however one passage in Luther's works which may explain his sudden change of attitude. In this passage Luther recounts a meeting with some Jewish scholars who travelled to Wittenberg and who insisted that they were obliged to obey their rabbis and the Scriptures. Luther acted cordially towards them and gave them a letter of recommendation asking the authorities to allow safe passage on the highways. When he learned that these Jews insulted Christ during their travels through Germany, Luther felt betrayed. Luther attributed his change in attitude to this event when he wrote

> Therefore I do not wish to have anything more to do with any Jew. As St. Paul says, 'they are conspired to wrath'; the more one tries to help them the baser and more stubborn they become. Leave them to their own devices.[26]

Luther's anger toward this particular group of Jews is understandable, yet he should have known that each person must be judged by his own merits. Some church members are hypocrites, but this fact does not justify the condemnation of all Christians. It seems that Luther really believed that he would be failing Christ if he allowed the Jews to ridicule the Messiah in this humiliating manner. James Atkinson rightly posits that Luther's primary interest centred around Jewish theology, and that he was very interested in their salvation.[27] His encounter with a few obstinate Jews was probably the culmination of many frustrations that he experienced, but even so, nothing can justify his reaction or his cruelty towards them. One final word must be said in Luther's defence. The impetus behind Luther's harshest attack was a Jewish pamphlet which he acquired in 1542. The contents of this tract are unknown, but as James Atkinson states, 'if we had this document it might go a long way to explain the tone and contents of Luther's book.'[28] In the final analysis, it seems that Luther forgot the very nature of the gospel which he represented. He also forgot the words of the true Messiah, who commanded his followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them.

**JASON MARTIN** is a student at Beeson Divinity School, Birmingham, Alabama, U.S.A.

## NOTES

1 Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 213.
2 *Luther's Works*, Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., vol. 21, *The Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, trans. A.T.W. Steinhauser (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), pp. 213–15.
3 *Ibid.*, p. 229.
4 *Loc. cit.*
5 *Loc. cit.*
6 *Ibid.*, pp. 354–55.
7 *Luther's Works*, Helmut T. Lehmann, ed., vol. 47, *Against the Sabbatarians*, trans. Martin H. Bertram (Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1962), pp. 59–65.
8 *Ibid.*, p. 213.
9 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
10 *Loc. cit.*
11 *Loc. cit.*
12 *Luther's Works*, Helmut T. Lehmann, ed., vol. 47, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, trans. Martin H. Bertram (Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1962), p. 123, p. 137.
13 *Loc. cit.*
14 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
15 *Loc. cit.*

16 James Atkinson, *Christianity and Judaism: New Understanding, New Relationship*, Latimer Studies, J.I. Packer, ed., No. 17 (Oxford: Latimer House, 1984), p. 40.
17 *Luther's Works*, *supra*, pp. 140–49.
18 *Loc. cit.*
19 *Ibid.*, pp. 165–66.
20 *Loc. cit.*
21 *Ibid.*, pp. 172–74.
22 *Ibid.*, pp. 215–18.
23 *Ibid.*, p. 268.
24 *Loc. cit.*
25 *Ibid.*, pp. 285–88.
26 *Ibid.*, pp. 191–92.
27 Atkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
28 *Ibid.*, p. 37.