

Was Martin Luther Anti-Semitic?

I recently received an angry email from a person who excoriated me for quoting Martin Luther, telling me what a terrible, anti-Semitic person he was and insisting that he and everything he said should be rejected.

Perhaps she was influenced by the oft-quoted tirade of the liberal, anti-Lutheran Cambridge professor, William Inge, known by his students as “the gloomy dean.” Inge, who is quoted by John Hagee in his book, *Jerusalem Countdown*, ranted, “The worst, evil genius of Germany is not Hitler, or Bismarck, or Frederick the Great, but Martin Luther.”

Luther and Anti-Semitism

Luther did, in later life, make horrific, inexcusable statements about the Jews of his day; statements that must be recognized and rejected by modern believers. Yet, how do we explain the fact that some of the most vigorous opponents of Hitler, willing to sacrifice their lives to protect the Jews, were German Lutheran pastors, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer?

The answer, no doubt, lies in the fact that Luther’s contention with the Jews is only found in his later writings and was theological in nature, not racial. His statements against the Jews were consistent with statements he made against Catholics, Turks (Muslims), Baptists and all he considered to be enemies of the gospel of Christ. For this reason, I will argue in this essay that Luther was not anti-Semitic.

We will begin by looking at the larger picture of Luther, for throughout much of his life he had very positive relations with Jews and advocated for their freedom and protection in an anti-Semitic world.

Luther's Love and Support for the Jewish People

Luther once stated that he admired—indeed, loved—the Jewish people. In his book of 1523 entitled *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, he attempted to win Jews to the gospel message of Christ, and in that context he also advocated humane treatment for them in the face of widespread anti-Semitism throughout Europe. He reminded Christians that Jesus Christ was born a Jew and that “we in turn ought to treat the Jews in a brotherly fashion.”

Luther continued to support his Jewish friend, Bernard, when he fell on hard times in 1531 and had to leave his family because of his debt. Luther and Melanchthon each cared for one of his children and continued this support for many years. Even though it posed a financial hardship for him, Luther said he did it because “he felt obligated to do good to Bernard as a member of the Jewish church.” Bernard also served as a messenger for Luther on numerous occasions.

Luther reported on one occasion that three rabbis visited him because they had heard of his interest in the Hebrew language and hoped to reach an agreement with him. Even though they rejected his argument that the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament point to Jesus Christ, Luther was kind to them.

Because Jews were forbidden to travel in that part of Germany, Luther gave them a letter of introduction in which he asked, “for Christ’s sake,” that they be granted free passage. Because of his mention of Christ, they refrained from using the letter.

To another Jewish friend, Luther argued that the gospel had to be of God; for how else could it be explained that Gentiles, who hate Jews, worship a Jewish king, much less a crucified one.

Luther Encounters Anti-Christian Polemics

Luther was eventually attacked by Jewish writers who vilified him for his attempts to win them to Christ. His writings, such as *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, were maligned and held up to ridicule.

Luther's response was, at first, mild. He replied, "For the sake of the crucified Jew, whom no one will take from me, I gladly wanted to do my best for you Jews, except that you abused my favor and hardened your hearts."

Luther's attitude toward the Jews obviously hardened as he entered more extensive dialogues/debates with Jewish rabbis on the Scriptures and the Messiah. Luther had hoped that, through these debates, the Jews would be won to faith in Christ.

Through these debates, however, Luther was exposed to rabbinical writings that maligned Jesus and Christianity. He was horrified to read of Jesus being vilified as the illegitimate son of a whore and a cabalistic magician who was exposed for his trickery and put to death.

Having been taught from childhood to reverence and honor God and Jesus and Mary, he responded with both anger and fear. He wrote;

I am still praying daily, and I duck under the shelter of the Son of God. I hold Him and honor Him as my Lord, to whom I must run and flee when the devil, sin or other misfortune threatens me, for He is my shelter, as wide as heaven and earth, and my mother hen under whom I crawl from God's wrath. Therefore, I cannot have any fellowship or patience with obstinate blasphemers and those who defame this dear Savior.

When he found the rabbis to be obstinate in their positions, he finally gave up any hope of the Jews coming to Christ *en masse*. And with them entertaining such blasphemous views of Christ, he gave up any hope of Christians and Jews being able to live together in harmony.

Although Luther should have responded in the spirit of the One he proclaimed (Who had prayed for His tormenters at the cross, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" [Luke 23:34]) he, instead, reacted with anger and fury and wrote a treatise entitled *On the Jews and Their Lies*. The word *Lies* in the title referred to the Jewish diatribes against Jesus, Mary and the triune God. The third section of this book contains the diatribes that he fulminated against the Jewish people.

The Significance of the Religious & Social Setting

Without excusing Luther, we must, nonetheless, understand that the medieval period was not a time of civility and tolerance. The medieval Roman Church, of which Luther was a part, imprisoned, tortured, and put to death those that deviated from the official teachings of that church.

Luther himself was declared a heretic and excommunicated because of his teachings on justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers. But for God's help, he too would have been imprisoned and put to death.

Not having—or desiring—material weapons with which to fight his enemies, Luther said he sought to overwhelm them with words. He thus used logic, ridicule, compassion, laments, threats, satire, hyperbole and every form of speech in making his arguments.

He did not hold back but unleashed a torrent of words against the "Romanists," the "Turks," the "Anabaptists," the "Jews" and all that he considered to be enemies of the gospel of Christ. Those on the other side used the same sort of abusive language against him.

In his excellent book, *Bonhoeffer*, Eric Metaxas, attributes Luther's increased vitriolic attacks against Jews, Catholics and everyone else with whom he disagreed, to be due in part to his deteriorating health as he aged. He suffered chronic constipation, hemorrhoids, cataracts in one eye and an inner

ear problem that caused dizziness and fainting spells. He also suffered mood swings and depression. In this condition, everything seemed to set him off. When his own congregation sang anemically, he called them "tone-deaf sluggards" and walked out.

Yes, *On the Jews and Their Lies* contains abusive and violent language; but Luther used the same sort of language against the Catholics, the Anabaptists and even his own German people whom he called "brutal, furious savages" who were spiritually "deaf, blind and obdurate of heart."

His recommendation that the Jews be expelled from Germany was his same stance toward Catholics, Turks (Muslims) and Anabaptists. In this he was consistent with the idea, he retained from Roman Catholicism, of a territorial state church that holds the right and responsibility to forcefully maintain the purity of the faith in a particular region.

It was smaller sects, such as the Anabaptists, Separatist Puritans and Quakers, who championed the cause of voluntary congregations, free to function in an open environment without coercion by a state church. Such an idea of openness and tolerance was, however, new and novel to the medieval period, and it was one in which Luther fell short in his theological battles, particularly with the Jews and Anabaptists.

Respecting Luther Despite His Shortcomings

The eminent Lutheran scholar, Martin Brecht, says that Luther's invectives against the Jews were not based on race but on a disagreement in theology. This seems obvious from the above evidence. Brecht says that Luther, therefore, "was not involved with later racial anti-Semitism."

Nonetheless, Luther's misguided invectives had the unfortunate result of him becoming identified with the church fathers of anti-Semitism, and they provided fodder for modern anti-Semites, who cloaked their hatred of the Jews in the authority

of Luther.

While we acknowledge Luther's failures, we must not fall into the trap of rejecting him and everything he stood for. That would be tragic. On their website ([http://www.lutheran-church-missouri.org](#)), The Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod has graciously and wisely denounced Luther's anti-Jewish invectives while recognizing the vital and critical contributions he has made to all of Christendom.

They also point out Luther's conciliatory tone in his last sermon when he said of the Jews, "We want to treat them with Christian love and to pray for them, so that they might become converted and would receive the Lord."

There is other evidence that late in life Luther's tone shifted back toward his earlier and more conciliatory attitude. In 1545, for example, about one year before his death, Luther revised a hymn that had blamed the Jews for the death of Christ (a common claim by the medieval church), removing the invective against the Jews. Luther's revised version reads,

T'was our great sins and misdeeds gross/Nailed Jesus, God's true Son, to the cross.

Thus you, poor Judas, we dare not blame,/Nor the band of Jews; ours is the shame.

If Luther were living today in this more tolerant and civil era, and with the Jews back in their homeland, he might well be one of their biggest supporters. {eo}

To read more about Martin Luther and his impact on Christendom, check out Eddie Hyatt's books, Revival Fire: Discerning Between the True and the False, and Pursuing Power: How the Historic Quest for Apostolic Authority and Control Have Divided and Damaged the Church, available from Amazon and his website at [http://www.eddiehyatt.com](#).