

There is a fatal connection between fighting the Devil in papists, peasants, and Jews and the subsequent use of the cry for reformation to rally "God's troops" against "God's enemies."

Darkness at Noon: Luther and the Jews

The Third Reich and in its wake the whole Western world capitalized upon Luther, the fierce Jew-baiter. Any attempt to deal with the Reformer runs up against this obstacle. No description of Luther's campaign against the Jews, however objective and erudite it may be, escapes the horror: we live in the post-Holocaust era. Under the spell of nightmarish terror, it is difficult to peer through the shadows of history, making clear judgments, passing a just sentence, as we grope our way along the path between aggressive accusation and apologetic explanation. Guilt-ridden voices abound, but our era requires far more than verbal repudiation: it calls for detailed information and an unvarnished view of the past. It needs collective anamnesis in the painful encounter with an epoch in which the modern world emerged. For this is not a matter of a German past which, once overcome, will free civilization from future fear of the Darkness at Noon.

Luther's late writings on the Jews are crucial to this agonizing but necessary task of remembering. The time to begin is August 1536, when Elector John Frederick of Saxony, Luther's magnanimous patron and staunch defender of the Reformation, decreed that the Jews were to be driven out of his electorate.⁵⁹ The elector was employing a means that had long been religiously sanctioned in Christendom and was thus no bolt from the blue to the Jews. Homelessness had become their fate in medieval Europe. But there was no getting used to it. Whenever they were expelled, they suffered renewed, severe hardship.

The elector had to be persuaded to rescind his measures or at least to mitigate them and grant Jewish merchants the right to pass through the electorate. The man most suited for the task was Josel von Rosheim, acknowledged far beyond his Alsatian home as the spokesman of the Jews, "governor of all Jewishness in the empire."⁶⁰ But who was to procure him access to the court of Electoral Saxony? There seemed to be a man at hand, a certain Martin Luther of Wittenberg, who in 1523, as a friend of the Jews, so it seemed, had bravely exposed himself to his opponents' suspicions. After all, who at that time could stand to hear that as Luther put it, "Jesus Christ was

born a Jew" and that these despicable Jews, whom God had disowned, were of the same lineage as Christ; we, who think so highly of ourselves as Christians, are heathens, only "in-laws and aliens"—so far had the reformer dared to go.⁶¹

Contact with the supposed "friend of the Jews" in Wittenberg was established by Wolfgang Capito, a reformer from Strasbourg. Capito was a well-known Hebraist and, though perhaps no "friend of the Jews" himself, had great respect for Jewish erudition.⁶² With Luther's help the elector was to be convinced to change his mind. When Luther refused, it was surely an unpleasant, inexplicable surprise for Josel von Rosheim and probably for Capito as well. Even today this refusal is often judged to be the decisive turning point in Luther's career from friendliness to hostility toward the Jews. Luther himself would have denied any such turning point, for he emphasized that he was and had always been of the opinion that the Jews should be treated in a "friendly way"—so as not to put any obstacles in the way to their conversion by God. He adhered firmly to this view to the end, though the "friendliness" turned into harsh "mercy," which was for him the only alternative to expulsion, the last means of keeping the Jews from being driven out.

Josel von Rosheim had mistakenly hoped he would receive help from Wittenberg and thus be able to pursue a policy protective of the Jews, but protecting the Jews was not part of Luther's task. He urged the temporal authorities to take steps to "rehabilitate" the Jews since the authorities were responsible for the welfare of the state and therefore for deciding on improvement and protection or expulsion. For the temporal authorities the relevant legal norm was one that, long before Luther, Swabian scholar Johannes Reuchlin had formulated in defense of Jewish wisdom. As the Jews' knowledge was to be employed in the service of Christians, he demanded that the Jews be protected as "guest citizens"—as long as they bowed to the laws of the land. But if they brought harm to the common weal and would not allow themselves to be improved, they were to be driven out.⁶³

For Luther the Jews were doing anything but improving.

What was worse, encouraged by their misreading of his own words, they had become more daring, defaming and cursing Jesus of Nazareth and regarding Christians as their "worst enemies," so much so that "if you could, you would [now] rob [all Christians] of what they are and what they have." However, the decision not to speak for the Jews in Saxony hinged on the analysis that they were appealing to religious tolerance while irreligiously re-

jecting their own God . . . the Father of Jesus Christ. Nothing would prevent the misery of exile unless "you accept your cousin and Lord, the beloved crucified Jesus, along with us heathens." That Luther spoke of the Jews as "cousins of Jesus" was not intended to convey unconditional acceptance to "opponents" of Christ: "Would you kindly accept my advice, . . . Because for the sake of the crucified Jew, whom no one shall take from me, I would gladly do my best for all you Jews, unless you should use my favor for your stubbornness. This is what you should know."⁶⁴

Three days before his death Luther added an "Admonition against the Jews" to his last sermon, held in Eisleben on February 15, 1546. It clearly illustrates the change Luther had undergone in old age. There had been no transformation of friendship into enmity; only the measures proposed for an effective policy of improvement and conversion had changed: The Jews are our public enemies; they do not cease to defame Christ our Lord, to call the Virgin Mary a whore and Christ a bastard, "and if they could kill us all, they would gladly do so. And they often do."⁶⁵ Nonetheless, "we want to practice Christian love toward them and pray that they convert."⁶⁶

In his letter to Josel von Rosheim Luther had still taken the opportunity to address the Jews directly, exhorting them to convert. But now he spoke to the Christian temporal authorities: the Last Judgment is fast approaching, so woe to those temporal rulers who have neglected their duty to protect Christendom! Now is the time for defense against the storm troopers of the Antichrist, whether they descend upon Christendom from the outside in the form of the Turks, subvert the preaching of the Gospel and order in the empire from inside the Church like the pope and clerics beholden to him, or, like the Jews, undermine the public welfare from the inside. Luther had discovered this concatenation of Jews, pope, and Turks as the unholy coalition of the enemies of God long before he began leveling his massive assaults on the Jews. Now that the terrors of the Last Days had been unleashed, the Church and temporal authorities were forced into their own defensive battle, one without the promise of victory but with the prospects of survival. Christian rulers, you should "not participate in the sins of others, you must pray humbly to God that he should be merciful to you and allow your rule to survive."⁶⁷

The measures had changed from "friendliness" to "harsh mercy"; what had not changed was Luther's view of the Jews. It was as it had been since a young professor of the Psalms had discovered the Jews to be obdurate foes of God. They had to convert, there was no way around it. They had to become

once again what they had once been: true children of Abraham, the true sons of Israel! But for the Jews as Jews there was no hope. They had to turn away from their devilish, Christ-defaming schools and synagogues, "but where they do not, we should not tolerate or suffer them among us."⁶⁸

This was not an appeal to the mob to rise up in a surge of riotous patriotism and attack the Jews in cruel revenge, for Luther had unequivocally prefaced his reeducation program with the statement: "We must not avenge ourselves."⁶⁹ His demands were directed at the temporal rulers, the princes and nobility.⁷⁰ They had, for the sake of money, tolerated accursed usury and thus watched the common man being robbed of all he had by the Jews; now they were to abandon their policies toward these enemies of God and Christ. The subject of exploitation was not new; it can be traced back to pre-Reformation social reform pamphlets. "Out with the Jews" was a common rallying cry in the streets and from the pulpits. Luther, on the other hand, did not advocate expulsion; he sought to preserve "tolerance," tolerance only, of course, for the purpose of conversion. That is the attitude that stayed with him to the end of his life. But the approach of the Last Days fixed temporal limits to the period in which tolerance could be exercised.

The authorities are warned not to become accessories to "the sins of others"; this undoubtedly referred to violations of the civic law alleged against the Jews. Not only were the Jews accused of blasphemy and denounced as usurers, they were also charged with infamous crimes constituting a public danger, with desecration of the Host and the Body of Christ and the ritual murder of children. Masses of them were condemned to the stake.⁷¹ The theme of "Jewish crimes" was already popular in the late Middle Ages and was invoked again later, in 1541, by Johannes Eck.⁷² In his most scathing tract against the Jews, *Of the Jews and Their Lies* (1543), Luther did not attempt to diminish this fear of the criminal offenses of the Jews. But the vehemence of the diatribe arises not from the warning against possible crimes of individuals but from his unrelenting attitude toward collective Judaism, which endangered Christians not only by deeds but also by words. That is why Luther advised the authorities to burn synagogues as schools of lies, to confiscate rabbinical books or—if no other means worked—to expel those Jews who would not be converted.⁷³ Because Jewish "blasphemy" was beginning to have effects, measures to protect Christianity had become necessary.

BUT THE "sins of others" had a further dimension, surely the central one to Luther, namely the rejection of Christ. By no means unique to the Jews, it

was attributed above all to the pope and his curia: "But now I am not astonished at the Turks' or the Jews' blindness, obduracy, wickedness. For I must see the same in the holiest fathers of the Church, pope, cardinals, bishops. O thou terrible wrath and incomprehensible judgment of God's high majesty."⁷⁴ Luther had long known of this intimate connection without calling for expulsion. But with the approach of the Antichrist, the only way out was a final separation—not only from the Jews, however! As Luther neared the end of his days on earth, the issue was not a Turkish crusade, or hatred of Rome or the Jews, it was upholding the Gospel against all enemies in the confusion of the Last Days.

The terrible tragedy of the relationship between Jews and Christians in world history can be studied in concentrated form in the history of this one man. As a Reformer he was "a product of the Jews," more precisely of his reflections on Israel as the people of God and repudiator of Christ. He saw in the Jews' resistance to the Reformation, to the rediscovered Gospel, an obstinately persistent estrangement from God⁷⁵ and thus a newly formed alliance of all the forces inimical to God.⁷⁶ In his tract *Of the Jews and Their Lies*, and summarized again in his final *Admonition* (part of an untitled sermon given in Wittenberg, 1546), the concept of a tolerance that leaves room for conversion is certainly retained. But his imminent expectation of the Last Judgment lets him interpret and evaluate the "signs of the times" so as to keep this tolerance within very narrow bounds, as it is the very last chance to avert expulsion. Luther's Reformation unquestionably did nothing to improve the political and social lot of the Jews.

Though his attitude toward the Jews remained medieval, even in the last phase of his life he never took over that medieval hatred for the Jews as "murderers of Christ" which subjected them "in a Christian spirit" to the rage of the mob. His views led beyond the Middle Ages in two ways. For one thing, the reception of his impulses in his own circle must be noted. We should not identify the Reformation movement with Luther to such an extent as to neglect the nuances of various views among a series of Luther's distinguished students. Justus Jonas, his close collaborator and the translator of his Jewish tracts, and the Nuremberg reformer Andreas Osiander did not implicate the Jews in the final struggle with the Antichrist and his armies. In their Evangelical faith they hoped for a common, liberated future for Jews and Christians in the Last Days. Secondly, the later Reformation hymns of a Paul Gerhard (†1676) or a Jakob Revius (†1658) were not the first to instill the idea that "It is not the Jews, Lord Jesus, who crucified You."⁷⁷ The Wittenberg Hymnal of 1544 already contained a verse which, though not ex-

pressly attributed to Luther, was so similar to what he wrote and preached over the years that it must be regarded as written by Luther's hand.⁷⁸

Our great sin and sore misdeed
Jesus, the true Son of God, to the Cross has nailed.
Thus you poor Judas, as well as all the Jews
we may not upbraid inimically,
for the guilt is ours.⁷⁹

In the anguish of the Last Days the ever-existing alliance of God's enemies challenged Luther into radical opposition. But precisely this view of history has a converse side, pointing to the future. In the mirror of Jewish history Luther discovered "us wretched Christians,"⁸⁰ who are also links in the threatening chain of evil. Through the Jews he found out who we actually are: by nature always heathens and enemies of God, hypocrites like the Jews when, before God, we rely on good pedigree, law, and works.⁸¹ The revelations in the Jewish mirror were incredible: "Jews"—penetrating the Church, to make matters worse, having managed to get it firmly into their clutches. Such sharp criticism of the Church was suited to attacking at the roots the Passion-oriented piety⁸² that instilled intense hatred and for centuries made Holy Week in Christian Europe a particular time of terror for the Jews.⁸³

But solidarity in sin between "us wretched Christians" and the Jews loses its penitential and reformatory force if "Reformation" is understood as having already led true Christians out of the bondage of ecclesiastical despots, the final Babylonian captivity before the end. Such Protestant triumphalism permits heretics, papists, Jews, and "us wicked Christians" to be looked back upon as past history. Then the "Jewish probe," prophetic gauge in the service of the Reformation struggle for the Church at the beginning of the end, is no longer safe from exploitation as a racist final solution. Through the Jews Martin Luther unmasked the capability of Christians to ally themselves with the primeval enemy of Heaven and earth. Eliminating this shocking view of Christians results in a destructive view of the Jews. Once this fundamental theological structure has collapsed, the anti-Judaism found in Luther—as in the Christian faith as a whole—becomes a pawn of modern anti-Semitism.