

# THE REACTION OF THE JEWS TO LUTHER

by GEOFFREY WIGODER

During the early period of the Reformation, Jews were naturally interested in the new developments emerging within Christianity. Many of them hoped that these changes would restore to Christianity its roots in Judaism, and in this respect they had already found the Hussites a change in the right direction.<sup>1</sup> The Jews were divided in their attitude towards Luther, some seeing him as an emissary of Satan, while others perceived him as a messenger of God. One of the major Jewish figures of that time, a contemporary of Luther named Josel of Rosheim, engaged in a polemic with Luther, in the course of which he compared the latter's teaching,

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1. For an extensive study of this subject, see Hayim-Hillel Ben-Sasson, "The Reformation in Contemporary Jewish Eyes," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Science and Humanities* IV (:12) (Jerusalem, 1971), pp. 239-326. On Jewish reactions to Luther as such, see Paul P. Traugh, *The Image of Martin Luther in German-Jewish literature: from Israel Benedicti to Leo Baeck* (unpublished doctoral dissertation), University of California at Davis, 1972, esp. Chapter III, pp. 28-49.

which had been hailed by so many Jews, with Jewish theology.<sup>2</sup> Thus, for example, he counterposed Luther's concept of justification by faith with the Jewish concept of Torah and Law, which he saw as its opposite. He likewise contrasted the Lutheran doctrine of predestination with the Jewish conception of free-will, and the idea of divine grace as taught by Luther with the Jewish teaching of individual moral responsibility. He wrote Luther's name in Hebrew as *lo tahor* – unclean – and referred to him as a second Haman.

On the other hand, there were those Jews who nearly saw in Luther a sign of the advent of the messianic age, signifying as he did the first sign of a break on the Christian front, a challenge to the existing situation which had been so unsatisfactory and under which they had been suffering for so many centuries. There was thus messianism on both sides, as Luther also entertained hopes in that direction. The Jews thought that this might perhaps portend a new situation. There was sympathy for the Reformation, if not always for Luther.

In fact, the early treatise by Luther, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," which was among the first statements declaring Jesus' Jewishness to the Christian world, was translated into Spanish for the Marranos in Spain, both because of its contents and its attacks on Catholicism. The Jews saw in the advent of Luther the removal of certain antisemitic elements that had been prevalent at that time and of some of the causes for attacks on Jews, such as the libel concerning the desecration of the Host, which was no longer relevant under Protestantism. They were delighted with Luther's iconoclasm and his anti-monasticism, because the friars and monks had been among the leaders of the anti-Jewishness of the Catholic Church. In his anti-clericalism, they somehow saw a herald of a better life for themselves. Of importance as well was his emphasis on Hebrew and on the Old Testament, which the common people now read for themselves, thereby gaining a new perspective and new ideas concerning the birth and origin of Judaism and the Jewish people. There was also a recognition on their part of certain aspects of Jewish law, such as the Divine right of kings. There was even a hope for what was much later to be known as "pluralism," in the dissolution of the one, monolithic church. Again, David Gans, an early Jewish historian who lived in Czechoslovakia at the same time as Luther, praised Luther enthusiastically.<sup>3</sup> He pictured him as a person who broke the pictures of the saints; he also praised his anti-mariolatry and the fact that he brought Christianity closer to monotheism.

These were some of the reactions of Jews at the time of Luther. When we turn to a later period – the beginning of the 19th century – we find a number of German-Jewish thinkers who held a positive evaluation of Luther. Thus, the philosopher Solomon Steinheim praised Luther as a hero in the fight for freedom of thought. "Blessed is the memory of Luther, in spite of everything in which he may

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2. Selma Stern, *Josel of Rosheim* (Philadelphia, 1965), pp. 192-193, 196-199.

3. Traugh, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

have been mistaken in word and deed.”<sup>4</sup> Another Jewish thinker and pioneer of about this time, Abraham Geiger, one of the precursors of the Reform movement, wrote, as did a number of other Jews, that Luther was a Pharisee – meant as a positive term – because he ended the demarcation between the priests and the people.<sup>5</sup> Martin Phillipsohn, a contemporary, praised Luther for having destroyed ecclesiastism and formalism, if not dogmatism.<sup>6</sup> The historian Heinrich Graetz, in the middle of that same century, was among the first to rediscover and describe Luther’s anti-Jewish writings,<sup>7</sup> which had been largely unknown for many centuries. These were revived by Nazi thinkers, and played a very important role during the regime of National Socialism.

I would like to conclude these remarks upon Jewish attitudes to Lutheranism with the statement of the Jewish participants to the recent Luther Conference in Stockholm. They declared:<sup>8</sup>

During this past year, members of the Lutheran family have been reviewing the teaching and actions of Luther and their religious, social and political implications. The teachings of Luther have profoundly affected the course of Jewish history, especially in Europe. We are aware of the exploitation of Luther’s anti-Judaism by the Nazis, to sanction their genocidal campaign against the Jewish people. In recent years, Lutheran leaders in Germany, Scandinavia, the United States and elsewhere have made significant efforts to uproot these teachings of contempt which emerged in the writings of Luther in the 16th century. We are heartened by the affirmative direction of this Lutheran-Jewish relationship. Jewish participants welcome the commitment of the Lutheran partners in dialogue to respect the living reality of Judaism from the perspective of Jewish self-understanding, and their undertaking that Lutheran writings will never again serve as a source for the teaching of hatred for Judaism and the Jewish people. This heralds a new chapter in the relationship between Jews and Lutherans, which should find practical expression in teaching, preaching and worship, as well as in joint activities for social justice, human rights and the cause of peace. We pledge ourselves to collaborate with our Lutheran colleagues in facing these common challenges. We trust that this year of Martin Luther observances will prove a turning point leading to a constructive future between Lutherans and Jews throughout the world.

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4. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-46.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36 and, esp. p. 47.

8. *Luther, Lutheranism and the Jews*, ed., J. Halperin and A. Sovik (Geneva, 1984), pp. 10-11.