

## JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS, PAST AND PRESENT

### MARTIN LUTHER AND THE JEWS IN LIGHT OF HIS LECTURES ON GENESIS

by S. BERNHARD ERLING

#### I

During this 500th anniversary year of the birth of Martin Luther, considerable attention has been given to what Luther wrote about the Jews. It is understandable that there should be such interest here in Jerusalem, but in articles written for readers elsewhere this aspect of Luther's teaching has also been stressed. It could be argued that this aspect of Luther's thought should not be magnified out of proportion. In relation to the totality of his literary production, the five treatises that deal specifically with the Jews would appear to represent a minor theme. In the treatise "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew" (1523),<sup>1</sup> what appears to be a friendly attitude towards the Jews is expressed. For example, Luther says: "If we really want to help them we must be guided in our dealings with them, not by papal law, but by the law of Christian love. We must receive them cordially and permit them to trade and work with us, that they may have occasion and opportunity to associate with us, hear our Christian teaching and witness our Christian life. If some of them should prove stiff-necked, what of it, for we ourselves are not all good Christians either."<sup>2</sup>

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S. Bernhard Erling, Ph.D., Th. D., is Professor of Religion at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. This paper was delivered at a meeting of the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel on November 24, 1983, in honor of the Luther quintecentennial year.

1. *Luther's Work*, American Edition, eds. J. Pelkan and H.T. Lehman (St. Louis, Philadelphia, 1955-) [below: *LW*], 45: 199-229; *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar, 1883-) [Below, *WA*], 11: 314-336.

2. *LW* 45:229; *WA* 11:336.

The other four treatises belong to the later years of Luther's life. In 1538 he wrote "Against the Sabbatarians: Letter to a Good Friend."<sup>3</sup> This letter was occasioned by the fact that Luther had heard that a group of Christians were maintaining that the Sabbath must be observed after the fashion of the Jews. He responds to this information by distinguishing in the Mosaic code between ceremonial commandments, which he says are no longer required, and the natural law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, which he insists was known before Moses' time and continues to provide the basis for social life everywhere. Luther writes:

All creatures rightly regard God and honor his name, as do also the angels in heaven. Thus we and all human beings are obliged to hear his Word, to honor father and mother, to refrain from killing, from adultery, from stealing, from bearing false witness and from coveting one's neighbor's house or anything else that is his. All the heathen bear witness to this in their writings, laws, and governments, as can be clearly seen; but nothing is said therein of circumcision or of the laws Moses gave to the Jews for the land of Canaan.<sup>4</sup>

The treatises that cause the greatest difficulty for those who would like to put the most charitable construction on all that Luther said were written in 1543. They are "On the Jews and Their Lies,"<sup>5</sup> "On Schem Hamphoras and on the Descent of Christ,"<sup>6</sup> and "On the Last Words of David,"<sup>7</sup> a treatise on II Sam. 23:1-7. What is especially offensive in the first two of these treatises is the harshness and vulgarity of Luther's language and the cruel severity of the proposals which he makes to the public authorities, that Jewish synagogues, schools and houses should be destroyed, that prayer books, Bibles, and Talmudic writings be taken from the Jews, that rabbis be forbidden to teach, that safe conduct on the highways be abolished for Jews, that usury be prohibited and that the wealth of Jews, presumably gained by usury, be taken from them and that they be required to support themselves by engaging in manual labour. If the authorities should prove reluctant to enforce these provisions, Luther says that the Jews should be expelled from the country and told to return to their land and their possessions in Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> It is unlikely, however, that Luther had given any thought to whether any such return was actually possible at that time. What he was recommending was what he called "sharp mercy," something like radical surgery, so that some Jews at least might be saved from the wrath that he was convinced awaited them.

If Luther were not one of the great theologians of the Church, whose writings have a continuing relevance for all Christians, these treatises, like the anti-Jewish

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3. *LW* 47:65-98; *WA* 50:312-337.

4. *LW* 47:89-90; *WA* 50:331.

5. *LW* 47:137-306; *WA* 53:417-552.

6. *WA* 53:579-648.

7. *LW* 15:267-352; *WA* 54:28-100.

8. *LW* 47:268-276; *WA* 53:523-537.

writings of Johan Eck and Desiderius Erasmus from the same period,<sup>9</sup> could simply be forgotten. One could still read some good things that Luther wrote and ignore the rest. As a matter of fact, his treatises against the Jews of 1543 were, to a large extent, forgotten. There was initial dismay on the part of Luther's associates, Philip Melancthon and Andreas Osiander, and other reformers in Strasbourg and Zürich, over what Luther had written. His draconian recommendations were largely ignored. The authorities did not burn synagogues, raze houses, or seize Jewish books. In Neumark the right of safe-conduct for Jews while travelling was withdrawn and Philip of Hesse introduced new measures prohibiting Jews from engaging in money-lending, but by and large the immediate effect of Luther's specific proposals was small.<sup>10</sup> It was in the last decades in the 19th century and the first decades of this century that an attempt was made by German racists to exploit Luther's inflammatory rhetoric. Yet a reading of Luther's treatises in their entirety would soon indicate how poorly they supported the purposes of Nazi ideology.

A reading of these treatises in their 16th century context would also indicate that Luther was not very original in his proposals. Jews, for example, had already long since been expelled from England, France, Spain, and Portugal, as well as from some other German territories. The climate of abuse to which Jews were submitted where they had not been expelled was of long standing. The treatise from 1543 which has not been translated as yet into English is "On Schem Hamphoras and on the Descent of Christ." With respect to the first part of this treatise, the churches of Zürich declared, "If it had been written by a swine herd, rather than by a celebrated shepherd of souls, it might have some — but very little — justification."<sup>11</sup> What is the significance of the words "Schem Hamphoras?" They are found in a story that was purportedly being told by the Jews, according to which Jesus was able to work his miracles by means of using these words as a magical formula. His success continued until Jewish leaders arranged to have Judas Iscariot also learn the formula and thereby bring about Jesus' downfall. Luther ridicules the story, but apparently he believed it was being told and thus represented a way in which Jesus was being slandered and defamed

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9. Johann Eck, *Ains Judenbüchclins Verlegung darin ain Christ gantzer Christenheit zu schmach, will es geschehe den Juden unrecht in bezichtigung der Christen Kinder Mordt. Durch Doctor Joh. Eck zu Ingolstadt. Hierin findst auch vil histori, was übels und büberey die Juden in allen teutschen land und andern Königreichen gestift haben* (Ingolstadt, 1541). Johannes Brosshede points out in *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden im Spiegel seiner Interpreten* (München: Hueber, 1972), 183, that the National Socialists did use citations from Erasmus in their anti-Semitic writings. See also James D. Tracy, *Erasmus, the Growth of a Mind* (Geneve: Libraire Droz, 1972), 174.

10. *LW* 47:123, 135–136.

11. *LW* 47:123.

among the Jews. What is amazing is that high up upon one of the exterior walls of the Parish Church in Wittenberg, in which church Luther regularly preached, there is a large stone relief on which the words “Schem Hamphoras” are inscribed.<sup>12</sup> Under the words there is a sow being sucked by apparently human sucklings, while behind it a man is lifting the sow’s hind leg, peering intently under it. Luther didn’t arrange to have that stone relief built into the wall of that church. It had already been there for some time when he first came to Wittenberg. Not every tourist sees it, but it is plainly visible for anyone who knows where to look for it. It is a source of embarrassment for the people of Wittenberg and they aren’t sure what should be done with it. It is in some sense a work of art and it has historical significance and should therefore perhaps not be destroyed. But it does require interpretation.

Let this stone-relief be a symbol for part of the problem facing us. As differing religious groups confront each other, one group is tempted to profane that which the other group considers holy, which in turn is regarded as blasphemy and leads to growing hostility. In the last years of his life, Luther was convinced that Jews were cursing and vilifying Jesus Christ and he insisted that this not be tolerated in a Christian land. Beyond all this, Luther toward the end of his life believed that the end of all things and the final judgment was near at hand. He saw signs all about him of the decline of the world. Wickedness had increased. The farmland was less fruitful than it formerly had been. According to the 90th Psalm “the years of our life are three-score years and ten, or even by reason of strength four-score,” but, Luther said, life expectancy in Germany at that time had been reduced to no more than about 60 years.<sup>13</sup> One thing that caused him concern was that, as he approached his own final reckoning with God, he and his people might, by reason of their toleration of Jews who continued to refuse to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, be held responsible for participating in this sin. In this connection, he took note of the instruction in Deuteronomy 13 that idolatrous cities are to be destroyed.<sup>14</sup> It is in these terms that I think his final warning to the people of his home town Eisleben concerning the Jews three days before his death is to be understood.<sup>15</sup> He had come to Eisleben to settle a quarrel and during the few weeks that he was there he preached four sermons, the last one on the text in Matthew where Jesus says: “I thank thee Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes” (11:25). In his sermon, Luther speaks ironically about those who think themselves wiser than they really are, who assume that because they hold high

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12. A photograph of this stone relief is to be found in *WA* 53:600.

13. *LW* 2:13; 6:189; 8:46–47, 113; *WA* 42:271; 44:140–141; 613, 662.

14. *LW* 47:269, 284; *WA* 53:523, 535.

15. *LW* 51:383–392; *WA* 51:187–194.

positions they must therefore have understanding. He criticizes those who must improve on what God had given us, who want to make the gift of Christ's body and blood for the strengthening of faith something that instead is to be offered to God, or those who instead of being content to hear God's word at home or in the parish church make pilgrimages to Aachen and Trier to see Joseph's trousers and the Virgin Mary's blouse. Christians are to come to Christ and find rest in him. His yoke is easy and his burden light. He can help us face even martyrdom with joy, if that should come. Those who have entrusted themselves to Christ need fear neither the pope, nor the Turk, nor the emperor. Luther concludes his sermon by saying that there is more to be said on that text but that he is too tired.

Then, however, there are some final words. There has been no reference at all to Jews in the sermon, yet as he is now leaving Eisleben he gives this final warning. He is willing to believe evil reports about the Jews, that they do much harm and would even kill Christians if they could. But, he says, we must deal with them in a Christian fashion and offer them the Messiah who is their flesh and blood, so that they may be baptized. If they will not believe in the Lord Christ, we must not suffer them to slander and curse him, for if we do this we participate in their sin. If then they convert and cease their slandering, we will gladly forgive them, but if not, we can not endure or tolerate them.<sup>16</sup> This is Luther's last public statement. Within three days he dies.

How shall we understand these words? I suggest that here is someone who, like the prophet Ezekiel, feels that he has been made a watchman for God's people and that it is therefore essential that he give warning. Luther may, of course, have been tragically mistaken in his understanding of what this watchman's role required of him.

In recent years, not least because of the incomprehensible disaster of the Holocaust and the troubling question as to the extent to which the long tradition of Christian anti-Jewish feelings, so strongly articulated in the writings of the elder Luther, prepared the soil from which moderate racial anti-Semitism has grown, Lutherans especially have felt the need to vigorously disavow Luther's teachings about the Jews. At a recent Lutheran-Jewish dialogue held in Stockholm, the Lutheran participants in the dialogue made this statement, according to a report by Geoffrey Wigoder in *The Jerusalem Post Magazine*: "We can not accept or condone the violent verbal attacks that the reformer made against the Jews. The sins of Luther's anti-Jewish remarks and the violence of his attacks on the Jews must be acknowledged with deep distress, and all occasion for similar sin in the present or the future must be removed from our churches...."

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16. WA 51:195-196.

Lutherans of today refuse to be bound by all of Luther's utterances on the Jews."<sup>17</sup> The question that must be asked, however, is which specific utterances of Luther are to be rejected? Was Luther, for example, in error in teaching that in Jesus of Nazareth the hopes and promises of the Hebrew Scriptures, the *Tanakh*, had been fulfilled and that from among the gentiles a new people of God had been formed?

In August 1983 it was my privilege to participate in the Sixth International Congress for Luther Research held at Erfurt. As I was planning to spend the academic year 1983/84 in Israel, I asked to be assigned at the congress to the seminar on Luther and the Jews, led by Prof. Heiko A. Oberman of Tübingen. As my contribution to the seminar, Prof. Oberman suggested that I prepare a report on the portrayal of the Jews in Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*. Some part of that paper will be presented in what follows.

## II

Luther considered Genesis one of the most important books in the *Tanakh*. Though he characterized the *Tanakh* more generally as a book of laws, he viewed Genesis as an extremely evangelical book, being made up "almost entirely of illustrations of faith and unbelief and of the fruits that faith and unbelief bear."<sup>18</sup> To none of his exegetical writings did Luther devote as much time as to these lectures. After beginning them in 1535, they occupied his time and energy in the classroom throughout the final decade of his life.<sup>19</sup> Melancthon suggests that in a sense these lectures may be viewed as Luther's *magnum opus* or his swan-song.

A problem that must be faced in using these lectures to determine Luther's theological views is that they were published by editors using students' notes. Except for the exposition of the first eleven chapters, these lectures were, furthermore, published posthumously. At some points it is possible that the thinking of the editors has been introduced into the exposition. Jaroslav Pelikan, the editor of the American Edition of these lectures, discusses this matter and grants that some ideas, such as the arguments for the existence of God or for the natural immortality of the soul, may reflect Melancthon's influence, but Pelikan concludes in words very apt for Genesis: "The hands are sometimes the hands of editors, but the voice is nevertheless the voice of Luther."<sup>20</sup>

When one examines Luther's portrayal of the Jews in these lectures, there is less

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17. *The Jerusalem Post Magazine*, Nov. 11, 1983, 9.

18. *LW* 35:236–237; *WA*, DB 8:13.

19. *LW* 13:75, 141; *WA* 40, 3:484, 593.

20. *LW* 1:xii.

difficulty in identifying his own opinions because we have the four treatises about the Jews, referred to earlier, written by Luther during the years he was working on the *Lectures on Genesis*. What one finds is that the portrayal of the Jews in these lectures does not differ significantly from that found in the polemical treatises. One finds, furthermore, that the theological pre-suppositions that undergird this portrayal are to be found in all of Luther's exegetical writings, from his early lectures on the Psalms of 1513–1515 to these final lectures of his old age. There is thus more continuity and consistency in Luther's thinking on this point at least than has sometimes been asserted. Throughout his life he believed that the coming of the Messiah had been foretold in the *Tanakh* and that the fact that he had come could be proved. He accordingly interpreted the sufferings of the Jews as evidence that they were no longer the people of God, but were being punished for not accepting Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>21</sup> It is important to note at this point that the primary charge against the Jews is not that they were Christ-killers, but that they do not acknowledge that the crucified and risen Jesus is the Messiah.

I shall now propose three criticisms of Luther that relate to the theological presuppositions indicated above. I have tried to develop this critique within the context of Luther's own world of thought. It is easy to show that the advances which have been made in biblical studies would require Luther to revise many of his assertions. What I have tried to imagine, however, are revisions that Luther could have recognized as necessary in his own time: for example, if he would have had some bold students who might have pointed out the need for such revisions in seminar on Genesis. I shall state these criticisms in the form of three questions:

1. Can one conclude that those who suffer, whether as individuals or as a people, are being punished by the divine wrath?
2. What more effective way could be found to communicate to Jews the Christian witness to what God has done for human-kind through Jesus of Nazareth?
3. Does not the doctrine that there are two kingdoms, an earthly-temporal kingdom and a spiritual-eternal kingdom, imply both that religious pluralism within a given political community is possible and that no coercion of any kind should be used to bring about religious unity?

Let us, then, imagine that we could have asked Luther this question: Can one conclude that those who suffer, whether as individuals or as a people, are being

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21. LW 8:238–240; WA 44:753–754.

punished by the divine wrath? Luther indicates in his *Lectures on Genesis* that he is keenly aware of the plight of the Jews. Like Cain, they have no secure and permanent dwelling place.<sup>22</sup> They have no great name, but are a reproach and a laughingstock for all nations.<sup>23</sup> “They were driven out of the land that God had given them and had blessed; they lost the kingdom; they lost their worship; they live in deepest darkness.... They are hated and despised by all men; they live most wretchedly in dirt and filth; they are not permitted to engage in the more honorable occupations.”<sup>24</sup>

This sad condition of the Jews, rather than calling for Christian sympathy and efforts to ameliorate the situation, gives support to the Christian faith according to Luther’s reasoning, for the fact that the Jewish kingdom has fallen proves that the Messiah must have come. Luther’s basic premise is that God does not lie or deceive, but surely keeps and fulfils his promises.<sup>25</sup> In Genesis 49:10 it is promised that the kingdom of Judah will continue till Shiloh comes. “Shiloh” is a term difficult to interpret, but Luther argues that among both Jews and Christians there is general agreement that this passage is messianic. The decisive consideration, therefore, is that the kingdom of Judah, which the oracle states will continue until Shiloh comes, is no more. It has been lying in ruins, Luther says, for 1500 years. Thus, he concludes that it is certain that the prophecy of Gen. 49:10 was fulfilled at least 1500 years ago. “The kingdom has fallen; the Jews have been dispersed, scattered over the whole world. Accordingly the Messiah has come.”<sup>26</sup> The fact that the Jews are without a kingdom therefore strengthens Christian faith, for Christ must necessarily have been revealed and the multitude of the gentiles has taken the place of the Jews. Assuming a messianic interpretation of Psalm 2, Luther can say that the unbelieving Jews are experiencing the wrath threatened in that psalm: “Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury.”<sup>27</sup> Jerusalem, Luther says, was destroyed by the Romans because the Jews persecuted the Gospel.<sup>28</sup> Their present wretched state demonstrates that God punishes defection from the faith.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, what if the kingdom of Judah had already fallen at the time of the Babylonian exile? In such a case the Shiloh oracle does not prove that Jesus was the Messiah, for according to the oracle the kingdom was to continue until Shiloh

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22. *LW* 1:294; *WA* 42:216–217.

23. *LW* 2:262; *WA* 42:449.

24. *LW* 2:263–264; *WA* 42:449–450.

25. *LW* 3:36; 5:204; 8:191; *WA* 42:574; 43:568–569; 44:718.

26. *LW* 8:239; *WA* 44:754.

27. *LW* 8:240; *WA* 44:754.

28. *LW* 1:323; *WA* 42:238.

29. *LW* 2:101; *WA* 42:333.



came. One could, of course, argue that God's truthfulness does not require that all prophecies be fulfilled in exact detail, especially not those expressive of hope. But if one argued in this way, since the new kingdom Jesus established did not consist in the formation of a state, one would also have to grant that it was not necessary for the Jews to continue to be a nation, with their own government, body politic, and civil laws in order that the fulfilment of the promise might take place among them.<sup>30</sup> This could also lead to a different interpretation of their sufferings. They need not be a sign that God had rejected them. Indeed, Luther ordinarily interpreted suffering as one of the signs of the people of God.

One thing Luther did not consider is the extent to which Christians participate in what he regards as the ongoing judgment on the Jews. Luther is, of course, aware that God works through the agency of human beings. God speaks through the voices of human beings.<sup>31</sup> We must trust in the goodness of God but we must also do what we can, using the means that are at hand. To do otherwise is to tempt God.<sup>32</sup> How then is it with God's judgment? Luther is quite confident that God's judgment can be proclaimed. This the prophets did and Luther in his interpretation of prophecies of judgment in the *Tanakh* continues to regard them as living words, applicable to the Jews of his time and in many cases also to Christians. But should those who proclaim judgment also seek to enact it? According to II Kings 18:25, the Assyrian Rabshakeh on behalf of Sennacherib says to the emissaries of King Hezekiah: "Is it without the Lord that I have come up to this place to destroy it? The Lord said to me, 'Go up against this land and destroy it.'" May not, however, Isaiah's interpretation of Assyria's role be the more accurate? "Ah, Assyria, the wrath of my anger, the staff of my fury! Against a godless nation I send him and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder.... But he (that is, Assyria) does not so intend, and his mind does not so think, but it is in his mind to destroy, and cut off nations not a few." (10:5-7)

Luther might have considered that it is one thing to interpret one's own sufferings as a divine visitation, a call to repentance, but it is quite another matter to interpret the sufferings of others in this manner. This Luther could have learned from the book of Job. Jesus also, when asked about some Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, answered: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse

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30. LW 2:261-262; 3:113; WA 42:448-449, 629.

31. LW 1:262; 2:81-82, 249, 358; 4:24; WA 42:194, 320, 439, 518; 43:153.

32. LW 7:219-220, 8:94; WA 44:461-462, 648.

offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:2–5).

Fundamental to Luther’s thinking is the relationship of law and gospel. The law comes first, breaking down our own righteousness and driving us to Christ the Savior. In Luther’s Small Catechism, the Ten Commandments come first and then the Creed with its story of salvation follows. Lutheran preaching often has this format, that one first preaches the law and then offers the consolation of the gospel. Luther felt that his own understanding of the Gospel had come to him in this way, and he probably thought that the Apostle Paul had had a similar experience. Yet Krister Stendahl has pointed out in his essay, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,”<sup>33</sup> that Paul does not in his letters indicate that he had any deep feelings of sinfulness prior to his conversion. To the extent that the dialectic of law and gospel has its rightful place in Christian experience, it should perhaps be understood as internal to this experience and not as descriptive of the way in which one enters upon that experience. Thus, insofar as Luther presupposed that in the proclamation of the Christian message to the Jews preaching of the law must precede telling the good news, he may have been in error. Luther, in order to stress the way in which the Ten Commandments summarize the natural law applicable to everyone, omits from the first commandment the words, “who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” But he thereby obscures the fact that what God requires always presupposes what he has first given. It follows that if fulfilment of Jeremiah’s oracle concerning the new covenant and its accompanying new obedience is to be claimed, there must also be good news that can be proclaimed. One must be able to tell of some good new thing that God has done. But how should the story of what God has done be told, especially to the Jews?

### III

This leads to the second question that could be asked of Luther: What more effective way could be found to communicate to Jews the Christian witness to what God has done for humankind through Jesus of Nazareth? Luther was fully aware of the meager success that had attended the Jewish mission. Some have sought to explain the harshness of Luther’s later treatises against the Jews by means of a “disappointment theory.” In 1523 Luther was friendly to the Jews because he hoped they would respond to his interpretation of the gospel. In 1543 he turned against them as he found they had not responded as he had hoped. Yet it is unlikely that Luther ever expected large numbers of the Jews to be converted. Paul in his Letter to the Romans explained that the Jews had been hardened in order that the gospel might be preached to the Gentiles, but Paul also said that at

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33. Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 78–96.

last all Israel would be saved. While Luther agreed that the Jews appeared to be hardened, he finally said that not even Romans 11 should be interpreted as foretelling the total conversion of the Jews.<sup>34</sup>

But Luther could have re-examined the way in which the Christian story was being told to the Jews. In his *Lectures on Genesis*, he argued that the revelation of Christ was already sufficiently set forth in this first book of Moses. He pointed to the promise of the woman's seed who will bruise the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15),<sup>35</sup> to the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob of a descendant by whom all the nations of the earth will bless themselves (Gen. 22:18, 26:4, 28:14),<sup>36</sup> and to Jacob's blessing of Judah (Gen. 49:10), which we have already discussed. Luther was convinced that this original revelation of the coming of Christ was known to the patriarchs and preached by them.<sup>37</sup> The only difference he acknowledged between Abraham's faith and his own was that Abraham believed in the Christ to be manifested, while he (i.e., Luther) believed in the Christ who had been manifested.<sup>38</sup>

Luther might, however, have been asked to explain why in no New Testament passage is the promise to Eve in Genesis 3:15 claimed as a messianic prophecy. As to the three seed-blessing texts (Gen. 22:18; 26:4 and 28:14), the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Luther in effect acknowledges that Paul's argument in Gal. 3:16 that the word "seed" or "offspring" should have a singular meaning in these passages is a forced interpretation.<sup>39</sup> Luther also knows that the form of the verb in the promise to Abraham in Gen. 22:18 is reflexive (*hithpa'el*), so that the promise should be translated: "By your seed all the nations will bless themselves," rather than the older, more traditional translation, "will be blessed."<sup>40</sup> He also knows from his interpretation of another blessing text, Gen. 48:20, where Jacob blesses Ephraim and Manasseh, the two sons of Joseph, what the significance of using names in blessings could be understood to be. Jacob blessed his two grand-sons saying, "By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying, 'God make you as Ephraim and Manasseh.'" Luther paraphrases this blessing as follows: "You shall be an example of the blessing, so that it may be said, 'Just as Ephraim and Manasseh have been blessed, so shall God also bless

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34. WA 53:581.

35. LW 1:217–219; WA 42:162–163.

36. LW 4:152; 5:16–17, 231; WA 43:245, 439–440, 588.

37. LW 1:328, 344; 2:280, 317, 382; 3:359; cf. 6:227; WA 42:241, 253, 462, 448, 536; 43:133, cf. 44:168.

38. LW 3:26; WA 42:567.

39. LW 4:152, 160; WA 43:245, 251.

40. LW 4:152–154; WA 43:246–247.

you.’”<sup>41</sup> What Luther does not consider is that this may explain what using the name of Abraham (or Abraham’s descendants) in blessing oneself originally meant in the three key seed-blessing passages. Abraham may have been blessed by being told that he and his descendants would become so great that others would pray to be blessed as Abraham and his descendants had been blessed. If so, it does not follow that Abraham and his descendants were to be a source of blessing to others, other than by serving as a model of what it means to be blessed.

A fascinating question is to inquire as to when the verbs in the Genesis passages promising blessing to Abraham and his descendants began to be given a passive rather than a reflexive meaning, so that through Abraham and his descendants all the families of the earth were to be blessed. This had certainly occurred at the time of the Septuagint translation of the *Tanakh*, the translation that Paul cites in Galatians, but it may not have occurred as early as the time of the writing of the book of Genesis.

If we conclude that the Genesis texts Luther cited do not have the clear christological meaning Luther found in them, it does not mean that they cannot at all be given such a theological use. It may mean, however, that these texts should be introduced at a later point in the telling of the Christian story. The decisive question with which one must begin is whether the early history of which Genesis tells has been brought to meaningful fulfilment in the life and destiny of Jesus of Nazareth, not whether the nature of that fulfilment is already anticipated in Genesis.

In a most interesting essay presented at a symposium on Religion in a Post-Holocaust World at the Hebrew Union College — Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Professor Irving Greenberg stated that there were two orienting events that occurred during the first century of the Common Era: one, the crucifixion of Jesus, decisive for Christianity; the other, the destruction of the temple, decisive for Judaism. “The Destruction (of the temple) ‘proved,’” Greenberg states, “not that there was no God, or that God had rejected Israel as the covenant people, but that the Divine, as it were, was withdrawing... to allow more room for human agency and maturation.... In a world where Roman legions triumph and the temple is destroyed, God is hidden. God’s redemptive acts are now to come more through human agency.”<sup>42</sup> It is ironic that, at the same time Christians were confessing that God had drawn near “in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (II Cor. 5:19), Jews saw God as withdrawing.

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41. LW 8:176; WA 44:708.

42. Abraham J. Peck, ed., *Jews and Christians after the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 77.

Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, wrote the following entry in his journal, which I prefer to call *Waymarks*, on Easter Day, 1960: "Forgiveness breaks the chain of causality through the fact that the one who 'forgives' — in love — take upon himself the responsibility for the consequences of what you did. It therefore always involves sacrifice. The price of your own liberation through the sacrifice of another is that you yourself must be willing in the same way to liberate, irrespective of the cost."<sup>43</sup> The date of this waymark implies that Hammarskjöld was interpreting the meaning of the death of Jesus, seeing in that death how in human relationships the tragic and seemingly unending chain of reprisal and revenge could be broken. No one would claim that Christians have forgiven as they have been forgiven, the condition for forgiveness required in the Lord's prayer. But it may still be true that it is the experience of being forgiven and recognizing in some measure the cost of that forgiveness that can motivate persons to give, or pass on, this precious gift to others. It may also be at this point that the human agency and maturation of which Greenberg speaks is most needed.

#### IV

There is a question, however, that Greenberg would perhaps ask, and that is: How can the experience of forgiveness change the world in which Roman legions triumph and temples are destroyed? In addressing ourselves to this question we must consider Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms and in considering this question, we shall also put our final question to Luther himself: Does not the doctrine that there are two kingdoms, an earthly-temporal kingdom and a spiritual-eternal kingdom, imply both that religious pluralism within a given political community is possible, and that no coercion of any kind should be used to bring about religious unity?

According to Luther the two kingdoms differ in this way. In the earthly-temporal kingdom, coercion may be used to enforce just laws, while in the spiritual-eternal kingdom, the only power that should be recognized is the persuasive power of the word. In his *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther affirms the necessity that there be two kingdoms by saying that although "there is mercy and forgiveness of sins, yet there is no pure mercy or the pure kingdom of the gospel and grace; but there is also the political kingdom, where there must be examples of punishment. Thus although a thief is pardoned, nevertheless he is brought to the gallows. Here the executioner must wield the sword and make use of the gallows and the wheel to frighten and warn others, even when the sin is forgiven.... For if there were no

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43. Dag Hammarskjöld, *Vägmärken* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1966), 158. The translation is my own. For another English translation, see *Markings*, translated by W.H. Auden & Leif Sjöberg (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), 163.

punishments and executions, we would achieve nothing with our sermons and forgiveness of sins, and the populace would make of the doctrine of the mercy of God a boundless license to sin.”<sup>44</sup> One could wish that in this statement of Luther the spiritual-eternal kingdom exercised more influence on the earthly-temporal kingdom. One could also wish that this influence might be extended to the relationships of nations one to another.

But it is also important that the integrity of the spiritual-eternal kingdom over against the earthly-temporal kingdom be maintained. Precisely because the word can change the social order, the earthly-temporal authorities often seek to control its utterance. Certainly no wholly satisfactory understanding of the relations between the two kingdoms was achieved in the Reformation period. One conclusion Luther did not draw from his doctrine of the two kingdoms was that, whereas only one structure of political authority appears to be possible in the earthly-temporal kingdom, it should be possible for several voices to be freely heard as we seek to define the nature of the spiritual-eternal kingdom. Luther would not have accepted the coexistence of several faiths within one community. In fact, he felt that considerable unity with respect to the proclamation of the Christian faith was also called for. We need, of course, a consensus sufficient to make our common life possible, but we need not be fully agreed as to the spiritual foundations upon which that consensus rests, even though these spiritual foundations are absolutely necessary and we should know what they are, insofar as each one of us is committed in one way or another. Not only do we not need complete agreement as far as these spiritual foundations are concerned, but we also don't need complete agreement with respect to all the religious and moral obligations that can be considered binding in given society. If this distinction between the consensus needed to make possible common life in the same community and the freedom that should be permitted with respect to religious belief and other dimensions of moral behavior is not recognised, no religious community anywhere can feel secure unless it has gained control of its own turf somewhere in the world.

In my opinion, the key to the solution of the problem as to how the two kingdoms should be interrelated is to be found through knowing what to do about education, education understood in the broadest sense, so that even the media are included. To which of the kingdoms does education belong? Can the educational enterprise be trusted to deal fairly with several religious heritages? Can objective methods for the study and teaching of religion be found, that are not destructive of faith but which permit a productive dialogue between the great faith traditions of our world to take place? Israel, where three monotheistic faiths coexist,

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44. *LW* 8:205; *WA* 44:728–729.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, could be a most important place to demonstrate that all of this is possible. Here some progress might be made toward defining the proper relationship that should exist between the earthly-temporal and the spiritual-eternal kingdoms.

What conclusions can we draw from what has been said about Luther and the Jews? I agree with the recent Luthéran statement in Stockholm that the violence of Luther's language in his treatises on the Jews must be deplored and rejected. In some cases this criticism may be extended to biblical authors, for Luther felt that in the language he used he was often simply following their example. We must also acquaint ourselves with Luther's treatises about the Jews, so that we are prepared effectively to refute persons who seek to exploit them for anti-Semitic purposes in our own day.

As to the theological presuppositions that led Luther to write as he did, I would maintain that one can share Luther's faith without sharing some of the assumptions that were basic to the way in which he articulated his faith. We need a new understanding of suffering, especially the suffering of others. We should, of course, not cause unnecessary suffering to anyone. In the interpretation of suffering, while much suffering is the consequence of sin, we should be aware that it is not always the sinner in such cases that suffers. While we may interpret our own sufferings as calls to repentance, we should be extremely hesitant to interpret the sufferings of others in this way. The notion that any individuals or groups are punished by God simply for refusing to share the Christian belief in Jesus should be totally abandoned. As Christians we should find new ways to witness to our faith. We will need new language and symbols in many cases to do this. In speaking to Jews it is more important that we tell a story, than that we come with proof texts. We should work to develop social structures in which believers, whatever their faith may be, are encouraged to tell their stories in the hope that these stories might at least in some measure be shared. If there is a monotheistic faith the adherents of which do not sense the obligation to witness to their faith, these believers have the burden of proof to explain why their faith in the one God of all the earth, the only God there is, should not be offered to all human beings. It is at the same time realistic to expect that, except for a few places on earth, persons with fundamentally different religious and ethical convictions will for the foreseeable future find themselves living together within the same political structures. Even though Luther did not develop the implications of his doctrine of the two kingdoms for the continuing fact of religious pluralism, there are nonetheless resources in this doctrine which can facilitate the peaceful and fruitful coexistence of the many religious communities to be found in our world.