
FAQ

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Anti-Semitism, Luther

J.K. McKee revised 12 August, 2019

What can you tell me about the anti-Semitism of Martin Luther? Is it true that Luther said some ungodly things about the Jewish people, actually having advocated violence against them?

The need for radical change in the Medieval Church was recognized by many Catholic scholastics who saw the high level of corruption and political intrigue, at the expense of the work of helping the common people. Martin Luther had difficulty with the Catholic practice of selling indulgences, and while he originally intended to simply reform the Catholic Church from within, he eventually had to break from it, and was declared a heretic.

Luther, as one of the early Reformers, was challenged left and right from many of his former Catholic colleagues. Some accused him of denying the Divinity of Yeshua, and claimed that he only said that He was a human. In the course of the accusations levied against him, Luther published many works. One of his early works, published in 1523, was the sermon *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*. This was specifically intended to show that Luther believed in the virgin birth, but he had also hoped to convince Jews of his beliefs as a secondary result of this. His comments in this work demonstrate that early on Luther was very gracious toward the Jews in Germany, recognizing many of the errors made by the Church, and that he hoped to see them come to faith. He wrote,

...Our fools, the popes, bishops, sophists, and monks-the crude asses' heads-have hitherto so treated the Jews that anyone who wished to be a good Christian would almost have had to become a Jew. If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian.

They have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs rather than human beings; they have done little else than deride them and seize their property. When they baptize them they show them nothing of Christian doctrine or life, but only subject them to popishness and monkery. When the Jews then see that Judaism has such strong support in Scripture, and that Christianity has become a mere babble without reliance on Scripture, how can they possibly compose themselves and become right good Christians? I have myself heard from pious baptized Jews that if they had not in our day heard the gospel they would have remained Jews under the cloak of Christianity for the rest of their days. For they acknowledge that they have never yet heard anything about Christ from those who baptized and taught them.

I hope that if one deals in a kindly way with the Jews and instructs them carefully from Holy Scripture, many of them will become genuine Christians and turn again to the faith of their fathers, the prophets and patriarchs. They will only be frightened further away from it if their Judaism is so utterly rejected that nothing is allowed to remain, and they are treated only with arrogance and scorn. If the apostles, who also were Jews, had dealt with us Gentiles as we Gentiles deal with the Jews, there would never have been a Christian among the Gentiles. Since they dealt with us Gentiles in such brotherly

fashion, we in our turn ought to treat the Jews in a brotherly manner in order that we might convert some of them. For even we ourselves are not yet all very far along, not to speak of having arrived.¹

Perhaps the most important statement to take note of are Luther's words, "If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian." Martin Luther recognized here, that the Church of his time had hopelessly failed in its job to provoke Jews to faith in Jesus the Messiah, and actually used some very crass words to describe this.

Some twenty years later, though, in 1543, Martin Luther published another work on the Jewish people, called *On the Jews and Their Lies*. Here, Luther treated the Jews as a cursed people and worthy of nothing less than God's wrath. While there are many damning excerpts from this work, the following quote sums up Luther's thoughts fairly well:

In brief, dear princes and lords, those of you who have Jews under your rule: if my counsel does not please you, find better advice, so that you and we all can be rid of the unbearable, devilish burden of the Jews. Lest we become guilty sharers before God in the lies, the blasphemy, the defamation, and the curses which the mad Jews indulge in so freely and wantonly against the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, his dear mother, all Christians, all authority, and ourselves. Do not grant them protection, safe-conduct, or communion with us. Do not aid and abet them in acquiring your money or your subjects' money and property by means of usury. We have enough sin of our own without this, dating back to the papacy, and we add to it daily with our ingratitude and our contempt of God's word and all his grace; so it is not necessary to burden ourselves also with these alien, shameful vices of the Jews and over and above it all, to pay them for it with money and property....With this faithful counsel and warning I wish to cleanse and exonerate my conscience.²

Luther actually instructed the German princes in this piece, "to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son and of his Christians. For whatever we tolerated in the past unknowingly and I myself was unaware of it will be pardoned by God."³

How could Martin Luther have gone from being a supporter of the Jewish people, to one who advocated that the German princes burn down their synagogues and eject them from their lands? *How could he become an advocate of such violence?* What were the series of circumstances that precipitated these horrendous things said by Luther?

Did Luther experience a great deal of rejection from the Jews, and that is why he lashed out against them? Was Luther under political pressure from the German princes to write a treatise against the Jews? Did Luther suffer from poor health, and if so did Luther possibly suffer from a mental disorder like dementia (or perhaps even Alzheimer's disease), which would surely not have been able to be diagnosed by Sixteenth Century medicine? Sadly, we will never know the definite answer, even though these are all possible factors.

What we do know for certain is that Martin Luther died three years after the publication of *On the Jews and Their Lies* in 1546. Luther was born and lived in a society that had anti-Semitic currents, as the Christians and the Jews seldom interacted, and people were subjected to a great deal of anti-Jewish stereotypes. Near the end of his life, Luther had definitely fallen prey to all of the stereotypes and urban myths circulating about the Jewish people. He made a foolish and egregious error in writing *On the Jews and Their Lies*, which Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party were able to use for anti-Semitic propaganda in the 1930s.

The challenge with Martin Luther and today's Messianic community is that many fall into the reverse errors that Luther did. Luther fell for much of the unsubstantiated prejudice against Jews that was present in Sixteenth Century Germany, and some in today's Messianic community have invented their own prejudice against today's Christian Church. Martin Luther was by no means the only Reformer, and he was clearly a human who made mistakes. In spite of his mistakes, God was still able to use him, just as He is able to use any of us in spite of our own weaknesses. King Solomon, for example, composed many valuable proverbs—but at the end of his life he was an apostate against God, responsible for the ultimate split of Ancient Israel into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, and in all likelihood will suffer eternal punishment.

Much of the anti-Jewishness that we see in any writings of Martin Luther and any of the other Reformers are largely the result of figures like Ulrich Zwigli, John Calvin, John Knox, and others who never had any kind of substantial interaction

¹ Martin Luther (1523). *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations. Retrieved 19 August, 2011 from <<http://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources>>.

² Martin Luther (1543). *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations. Retrieved 19 August, 2011 from <<http://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources>>.

³ Ibid.

with European Jews. Many were simply repeating the anti-Semitic social prejudices that they encountered, in the cultures into which they were born. We need to understand Luther and the Reformers for the times and cultures in which they lived.

Interestingly enough, it was not until after the Napoleonic Wars that anti-Semitism in Europe began to change. With Napoleon providing equal citizenship for all in France, and then moving throughout Europe, particularly in the German states, Jews began to receive equal rights with their Christian neighbors. They began to be integrated into society and religious ideas began to be shared between Jews and Christians. Today in the Twenty-First Century, those of us in the West are the product of a society that encourages tolerance and diversity, but we still fall prey to many stereotypes about the Jews or other ethnicities. But when it comes to the errors of Martin Luther, both the Lutheran Church and many of its clergy have been very repentant in denouncing his anti-Semitism.

In the Messianic movement today, we do have a great deal of maturing to do. We have a shared theological heritage with both the Church and Synagogue. **Both groups of people have made errors.** Jews have fallen prey to anti-Christian prejudices because of the religious culture into which they have been born, just as Christians have fallen into anti-Jewish prejudices. And it does not just stop with the Jews, because many Christians in North America have been guilty of holding on to many other racial prejudices, all of which are ungodly and unacceptable in the Body of Messiah. Each of us has been guilty for holding to prejudice at one time or another in our lives, so to point fingers at Martin Luther without pointing fingers at ourselves is judging with an unfair scale. There is a great deal of prejudice in the Messianic movement toward Arabs and Muslims today, and on the whole we seldom pray for their salvation.

Messianics need not have any prejudice, and we need to let God be the final judge of all human beings—including Martin Luther. We have to make sure that we are faithful to the work that the Lord has given us, and learn from the mistakes of history.