In a 1543 treatise, Martin Luther described a statue on the outside of the church in Wittenberg where he frequently preached. Likely erected in the early 14th century, it depicted “a sow carved in stone. Under her, young piglets and Jews lie sucking. Behind the sow stands a rabbi who lifts the sow’s right leg and with his left hand he pulls the rear over himself.”¹ Vulgar images of Jews and pigs, in which one or more Jews suckled from a pig, ate its feces, or peered into its bottom, were known as Judensau (literally, a Jewish pig), and were constructed on a number of late medieval churches in German-speaking lands.² Luther offered a new and offensive interpretation of the “rabbi’s” actions, claiming that he “bends down and looks most studiously under her rear at the Talmud inside.”³ Approximately 200 years later, Luther’s boorish comparison of the Talmud to a pig’s rectum was literally carved into stone in Wittenberg, when the word “Rabini” [rabbi] and the title of Luther’s treatise, Von Schem Mephoras (On the Ineffable Name of God), were inscribed above the Judensau.⁴ Debate over this statue continues until today. In the 1980s, a memorial for those murdered in the Holocaust was built on the ground beneath the statue.⁵ In 2019, a German Jew brought a court case before the German court, in an unsuccessful attempt to have the Judensau removed from the church.⁶

¹ For the translation, see Brooks Schramm and Kirsi I. Stjerna, Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People: A Reader (Minneapolis, MN, 2012), 179. Wherever possible I have cited only English translations and secondary literature.
³ Schramm and Stjerna, Luther, 179.
⁴ Shachar, Judensau, 31.
⁵ Schramm and Stjerna, Luther, 178.
The Wittenberg Judensau is in many ways emblematic of Luther’s antisemitism. It was rooted in medieval stereotypes, while reflecting Luther’s particular theology, expressed in the harsh and crude metaphors for which he was renowned. Like the statue, which was embellished further in the 17th century and still stands at Wittenberg, the impact of Luther’s antisemitism was felt from the early modern period through the 19th and 20th centuries. Luther’s antisemitism remains a topic of contemporary discussion and was the focus of multiple conferences marking the 500th anniversary of the Ninety-Five Theses in 2017.

Luther’s antisemitic writings generated intense scholarly debate because Luther is such a towering historical figure. His theology transformed Christian practices and beliefs across Europe and beyond. In addition, Luther came to be viewed as a pivotal figure in German national history. His influence as a Christian leader, and more specifically as a German theologian whose antisemitic writings were cited by the Nazis in the 20th century, render his antisemitism a widely studied and hotly debated issue.

Moreover, Luther was an extremely prolific and popular writer. Many of his writings deal with Jews, albeit in different genres and to different ends. His sermons and biblical interpretations often reference Jews and Judaism in a theological context, while additional compositions include explicit polemics advocating concrete policies regarding the local Jewish population. David Nirenberg has claimed that Luther represents a turning point in the history of anti-Judaism precisely because he both wrote about theology and attempted to convince others to translate his ideas into political action.

Theologians and historians have applied different methodological approaches when examining Luther’s antisemitic writings, analyzing various elements of his vast literary corpus in order to interpret his attitudes toward the Jews. The specific texts scholars choose to study shape their interpretation of what Luther thought about the Jews, and when and why his perspective evolved. In this essay, I will present a broad view of Luther’s writings about the Jews, including different genres of his writing as well as different scholarly approaches to those texts. The impact of these texts in both Christians and Jewish circles in the early modern period will be considered.

---

LUTHER THE AUTHOR

Born in Eisleben in 1483, Luther went on to study theology and entered the Augustinian order, eventually serving as faculty at the University of Wittenberg. His Ninety-Five Theses, posted and disseminated in 1517, questioned many teachings of the Catholic church, including the primacy of the papacy. Luther’s ideas drew the ire of the church, and he was excommunicated in 1521. Protected by his powerful patron, Friedrich, the Elector of Saxony, Luther found shelter and wrote prolifically. During the 1520s, his ideas and those of other reformers spread widely, and multiple cities in the Holy Roman Empire and the Swiss Confederation adopted reformed preaching and theology. In 1530, many imperial cities officially adopted Lutheranism. Following wars between confessions and futile attempts by church leaders to heal the rift between Catholics and Protestants, the 1555 Peace of Augsburg in the Holy Roman Empire officially permitted territorial authorities to determine the confession practiced in their area of jurisdiction. European Christendom was irrevocably rendered multi-confessional.9

From his early years in Wittenberg until his death in 1546, Luther continually composed treatises, exegetical works, and sermons. Stories of what was said around his table were also preserved in what is known as Luther’s Table Talk, and his correspondence with various reformers, theologians, and political leaders is preserved as well.10 Luther was renowned as a best-selling author, although some of his writings were far more popular than others; his German treatises were far more accessible than his Latin compositions. Some of his teachings were printed as pamphlets or broadsides, illustrated by Luther’s friend and neighbor Lucas Cranach. The juxtaposition of short, sometimes rhymed German texts with simple woodcuts brought Luther’s message to a wider, often illiterate population. Thus, for example, a pamphlet with paired images comparing the life of Jesus with the decadence of the pope created a vivid and accessible picture of Luther’s criticism of the papacy.11 Other Lutheran ideas were spread through the sermons of local clerics and through hymns sung by

10 For Table Talk, see Martin Luther, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Theodore G. Tappert, Luther’s Works, vol. 54 (Philadelphia, 1983).
11 Martin Luther, Passional Christi und Antichristi (Wittenberg, 1521).
parishioners. The vastness of Luther’s corpus – from ribald remarks at dinner to poems accompanied by grotesque images to complex theological interpretations of seemingly opaque biblical verses – renders the task of understanding Luther a lifelong enterprise. Therefore, scholars have tended to focus on one or another specific segment of his work, which in turn has shaped their respective interpretations of his antisemitism.

LUTHER’S THEOLOGICAL STANCE TOWARD THE JEWS

In Wittenberg, Luther taught and wrote about the Old Testament extensively. The hermeneutical Jew – not a real person, but a theoretical figure diametrically opposed to the teachings of the church – was therefore present in many of Luther’s writings about the Bible. Luther was deeply rooted in the medieval tradition of interpreting the Bible christologically, and for him, the Old and New Testaments were interwoven and inseparable texts. The New Testament was the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament, and at their center was the truth that Jesus was the messiah. The Jews’ rejection of Jesus was incomprehensible to Luther, and they therefore symbolized the antithesis of a good Christian. Even in his early lectures on the Psalms in Wittenberg, the Jew appears in this vein. Luther’s exegesis of Psalms 1:1, “Blessed is the man who has not walked in the counsel of the ungodly,” interprets the word “ungodly” as referring to the Jews: “He did not consent to the designs of the Jews, who afterwards crucified him.” The Jews thus epitomized all that was ungodly and opposed to Jesus.

Moreover, Luther considered the political realities of the Jews for the past 1,500 years as evidence of their rejection by God. Having suffered the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, exile, a lack of autonomy, and, in Luther’s own lifetime, expulsions from major German cities, it was impossible that the Jews still be considered the chosen people. This claim was a major refrain in Luther’s writings about the Bible more generally, and about the Jews specifically.

13 Schramm and Stjerna, Luther, 12–13.
14 Martin Luther, First Lectures on Psalms, 1513–15, in Schramm and Stjerna, Luther, 42.
15 Schramm and Stjerna, Luther, 5–6.
16 See, for example, Luther’s Against the Sabbatarians, below.
The argument that the Jews had rejected the messiah and that their current historical situation was the result of a punishment for that sin was by no means unique to Luther. His stance against Judaism echoed that of his forebears, some from ancient times, others from the Middle Ages. Indeed, given his background as an Augustinian monk and the fact that in his early years he set out to reform rather than rupture the church, it is not surprising that Luther’s theology toward the Jews was firmly rooted in medieval anti-Judaism. Luther, however, intensified the argument against the Jews, claiming that the Jews must be linked to God’s adversary, the devil. How else could a people so stubbornly and willfully ignore the messiah and the divine message which their own historical circumstances reflected?

The devil played a particularly central and fearsome role in Luther’s personal theology. Terrified of sin, fearful he was being tricked by the devil, persuaded the pope was the antichrist, and convinced that the end of times was nigh, Luther has been dubbed by the scholar Heiko A. Oberman as a man caught “between God and the devil.” Thus, while the link between the Jews and the devil did not originate with Luther, casting the Jews as satanic had a deeper meaning given Luther’s preoccupation with the devil.

As Luther’s theology developed, the Jews also became a trope through which he could polemicize against the Catholic church. One recurring theme in his work is the carnal nature of the Jews (an idea expressed already by Paul), which was exemplified by the Jewish observance of commandments. For Luther, as for centuries of Christian thinkers, there was no need to observe the strictures of the Old Testament once the messiah had arrived. Yet Luther used the example of Jewish observance to vilify the Catholic belief in justification by works. In Luther’s theology, humans were saved through faith alone – *sola fidei* – by the grace of God. This was a rejection of Catholic theology, which claimed that both faith and good works, such as charity, led to salvation. Luther connected the Jews with the “papists” in various texts, mocking both for performing actions for heavenly merit.

19 Oberman, *Luther*.
For Luther, while such behavior might be the mark of a good Christian, it could not possibly earn salvation.  

Furthermore, in his earlier years, Luther hoped that his teachings would entice the Jews to convert to Christianity. Convinced of the truth of his message and of the errors of the Catholic church, Luther explained the Jews’ resistance to earlier attempts to convert them as the result of faulty Catholic theology. He believed, in the 1520s, that his truth would convince the Jews otherwise.

**THAT JESUS CHRIST WAS BORN A JEW**

It was in his 1523 treatise, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, that Luther made the latter claim. Initially published in German, followed by a Latin translation intended for an international audience, the bulk of the treatise was a defense against Catholic claims that Luther did not believe in doctrines such as the virgin birth or the presence of the body of Christ in the Eucharist. Luther defended himself in the treatise, demonstrating how Old Testament prophecies indeed heralded the virgin birth.

Yet the treatise also had a secondary purpose, namely, to convert the Jews.  

Luther sharply critiqued Catholic treatment of the Jews, stating that the Catholics “have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs rather than human beings.” He further argued that misguided Catholic teachings had prevented the Jews from converting:

> When the Jews then see that Christianity has become a mere babble without reliance on Scripture, how can they possible compose themselves and become right good Christians? . . . I hope that if one deals with them in a kindly way and instructs them carefully from Holy Scripture, many of them will become right good Christians.

Luther explained that had he been a Jew, he would never have converted to Christianity, and advocated for a concrete policy change toward the Jews, one that he hoped would attract them to convert. During the

---

21 See, for example, Luther’s lectures on Galatians 4:21–31, in Schramm and Stjerna, *Luther*, 60–66.

22 Thomas Kaufmann, *Luther’s Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism* (Oxford, 2017), 55. The Latin version of the treatise includes a letter mentioning the conversion of Bernhard, a Jew who converted to Lutheran Christianity and who lived near Luther’s Wittenberg.

23 Luther, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, in Schramm and Stjerna, *Luther*, 78.

24 Ibid.
16th century, Jews were limited in where they could live and in which professions they could hold in the Holy Roman Empire. Luther encouraged allowing the Jews greater freedom, to the specific end of enticing them to convert.\textsuperscript{25}

In the decades following, Luther’s hopes that the truth of his message would be confirmed by mass Jewish conversion were dashed. This is, perhaps, one of the major reasons for what many scholars have seen as a turn in Luther’s attitudes toward the Jews. While in 1523, Luther advocated for more benevolent policies toward the Jews, by the late 1530s, and certainly by the 1540s, his recommendations had changed.

Luther voiced his reluctance to help the Jews in a letter he wrote to Josel of Rosheim, the leader of German Jewry. The Elector of Saxony forbade Jews access to his lands, whether as residents or as travelers, in 1536. Josel turned to Luther, hoping the latter might exert his influence and convince the Elector to reinstate the right for Jewish safe passage. Luther refused:

For my heart has been, and still is, that one should treat the Jews kindly, out of the conviction that God might now graciously consider them and bring them to their Messiah; but not out of the conviction that through my benevolence and influence they should be strengthened in their error and become worse.\textsuperscript{26}

Luther elucidated that his recommendations in 1523 had been based solely in the hope that they would convert, not out of any kindness toward Jews, and certainly not toward Judaism. Luther hardly interacted with Jews, if at all, and his report of having met with three learned Jews resulted not in their conversion but, rather, in him being exposed to their aversion to Christian interpretations.\textsuperscript{27} By the 1530s, the Jews still had not converted en masse, and Luther had despaired of converting them.

**LUTHER AND THE JEWS: THE LATER YEARS**

In 1537, Luther penned Against the Sabbatarians. Nominally an invective against a Christian sect observing the Sabbath on Saturday, his wrath was directed against the Jews, whom he blamed for luring

\textsuperscript{25} Luther urged allowing the Jews “to trade and work with us, to associate with us, and hear our Christian teaching.” Luther, That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew, in Schramm and Stjerna, Luther, 82.

\textsuperscript{26} Luther, “Letter to Josel of Rosheim,” in Schramm and Stjerna, Luther, 127.

\textsuperscript{27} See the relevant texts describing the encounter in Schramm and Stjerna, Luther, 105.
Christians into erroneous practices. The text of Against the Sabbatarians is an attack on Jewish practice, in line with the theological arguments against Judaism described above. Luther castigated the Jews for their continued observance of the commandments and ridiculed the notion that the messiah had not yet come.

At the conclusion of Against the Sabbatarians, Luther promised to follow up with additional thoughts on the Jews. He then dedicated three extremely harsh treatises to the topic of the Jews, all published in 1543: On the Jews and Their Lies, On the Ineffable Name of God, and On the Last Words of David. The treatises termed the Jews blasphemers and usurers, attacking Jewish theology and ritual practice. Luther summed up his position by explaining, “They are the Devil’s children damned to hell.”

Though the theology was not new, the language was harsher and more vulgar than in his earlier writings. It was in the second treatise that Luther linked the Talmud to the Wittenberg Judensau. Moreover, in On the Jews and Their Lies, Luther recommended setting “fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever see a stone or cinder of them again.” He advocated that Jewish homes be “razed and destroyed,” claiming they were loci for Jewish sins, and counseled confiscating all Jewish books and banning Jewish prayer and teaching. Luther urged denying Jews safe conducts for travel, remarking, “Let them stay at home.” Calling to abolish usury, Luther suggested forcing them into manual labor. Citing the biblical verse punishing Adam with labor as a means to obtain food, Luther also drew on stereotypes of the lazy, Jewish usurer:

For it is not fitting that they should let us Goyim toil in the sweat of our faces, while they, the holy people, idle away their time behind the stove, feasting and farting, and on top of all, boasting blasphemously of their lordship over Christians by means of our sweat.

Should the local Christian populace fear the Jews, however, Luther advocated expelling them, “ejecting them forever from this country.”

28 Kaufmann, Luther’s Jews, 90.
29 Luther, Von Schem Mephoras, in Schramm and Stjerna, Luther, 179.
31 Ibid., 269, 286.
32 Ibid., 272.
33 Ibid.
The vitriol in On the Jews and Their Lies is all the more shocking when compared with the earlier policies advocated by Luther twenty years earlier. The attempt to understand Luther’s attitude toward the Jews, particularly this apparent shift over time, has therefore attracted much scholarly attention.

One view, promoted in particular by theologians, is that Luther’s position vis-à-vis the Jews was fundamentally consistent over the course of his life. The classic articulation of this position is seen in Wilhelm Maurer’s scholarship. Maurer argues that Luther’s attitude toward the Jews was based entirely on his theology and did not shift from his early writings on the Psalms until his later writings in 1543. He insists that the primary motive of Luther’s 1543 treatises was how to read the Old Testament properly, with Jewish practice and exegesis exemplifying that which was antithetical to the truth. He highlights that this was consistent with Luther’s earlier writings, in which Luther stated that Jewish opposition to and antagonism toward Christ had earned them divine wrath. Maurer argues that Luther’s later policy recommendations were rooted in his existing theological view that Jews were blasphemous; it was due to his desire to root out blasphemy from Christian society that he called for burning synagogues and destroying Jewish books. Maurer separates himself from those policy recommendations by explaining these as anachronistic and rooted in erroneous ideas of the Middle Ages.

Maurer’s position has been critiqued by Mark U. Edwards, who views the former’s perspective as ahistorical. Edwards argues that theologians such as Maurer are motivated to detach Luther’s theology from his “anachronistic” policies as this permits modern Lutherans to retain the former while rejecting the latter. Edwards further notes that many of these scholars go on to highlight the fact that Luther’s antisemitism was rooted in religious rather than in racial categories, facilitating an important distinction between the early modern Luther and the modern Nazis, whose hatred of Jews was racially based.

Edwards maintains that historians must apply a historical lens to Luther, analyzing all of his writings in the context of the 16th century. Edwards focused, therefore, not solely on Luther’s anti-Jewish
writings but, rather, on all of Luther’s writings in his later years. Edwards points to parallels between Luther’s writings against the Turks, Catholics, Jews, and even in internecine battles between Protestants. Throughout these texts, Luther utilized bestial and scatological language to vilify his opponents (and as noted above, sometimes with accompanying illustrations).37

Various scholars have sought to identify a specific catalyst that led to Luther’s harsher attitudes later in life. Some have looked to developments in his personal life, pointing to physical illnesses that plagued Luther in later years.38 Other scholars have taken a more psychohistorical approach, claiming that Luther suffered from mental illness and melancholy.39 Some scholars have argued that he suffered because of concrete personal events, such as the death of his daughter, which led him to question whether he was in fact being punished by the devil.40 As mentioned above, Luther’s belief that the Last Judgment was approaching shaped his core beliefs and writings; this too likely intensified in later years.41

Some scholars have pointed to historical, rather than personal, catalysts to analyze Luther’s later writings. As mentioned above, Luther’s failure to convert the Jews has been regarded as a factor that resulted in the policies in the later treatises. Thomas Kaufmann, who tends to argue that Luther’s views toward the Jews were theologically consistent, claims that Luther’s 1523 treatise reflects his willingness to reserve judgment on the Jews, waiting to see whether they would indeed convert.42 When they did not, he followed through with policy recommendations that were, for a 16th-century theologian, the logical extension of his long-held theological position toward the Jews.43

Kaufmann points to an additional adversary against whom Luther was writing in On the Jews and Their Lies, one from within his own community: Christian Hebraists. Many of Luther’s colleagues had been trained as Renaissance humanists, and as part of their quest to understand the Old Testament in its original Hebrew, had studied Hebrew

37 Ibid., 203–8.
38 Edwards, Luther’s Last Battles, 9–15.
39 Ibid., 15–19.
40 Kaufmann, Luther’s Jews, 94–95.
41 Oberman, Roots of Anti-Semitism.
42 Kaufmann, Luther’s Jews, 97–98.
43 Schramm and Stjerna also contend that Luther held a consistently negative theology about Jews, while recognizing that his hostility toward them intensified in his later years. See Schramm and Stjerna, Luther, 3.
and Jewish rabbinic commentaries. While all theology students studied Hebrew, Luther did not master the language as well as many of his contemporaries, and his knowledge of Jewish interpretations rested largely on the writings of his predecessors, such as the medieval Nicholas of Lyra, and on the polemical writings of contemporary converts from Judaism to Christianity, such as Antonius Margaritha. Luther was troubled by the extensive use of rabbinic materials employed by Christian Hebraists, angered by their reliance on Jewish interpretations. Luther in fact argued that the Hebraists’ reliance on Jewish materials was deeply misguided. “Since Jews repudiate this Christ,” Luther explained, “they cannot know or understand what Moses, the prophets, and the psalms are saying, what true faith is, what the Ten Commandments purport, what tradition and story teach and prove.” The later treatises therefore constituted an attack on the Hebraist approach, as well as on the Jews themselves.

CONTEMPORARY REFORMERS AND THEOLOGIANS

The historical approach to understanding Luther’s antisemitism mandates examining him alongside his contemporaries. Luther was by no means the only Christian theologian of his time to write against the Jews. Hebraists who studied and collaborated with Jews frequently used anti-Jewish language to mock Jewish beliefs and practices as superstitious, often as a means of distancing themselves from charges of Judaizing despite their reliance on Jewish interpretations. Even reformers such as Andreas Osiander, who defended the Jews against accusations of ritual murder, wrote against them using pejorative language. Tolerance in the 16th century did not include accepting

47 Kaufmann, *Luther’s Jews*, 102.
that others held diverse beliefs. Moreover, the sincerity of some Jews who had converted to Christianity and joined the clergy was doubted long after their conversion. Consequently, some found a spiritual home in neither the Catholic nor the Protestant church, despite having migrated from one to the other. As Elisheva Carlebach has shown, baptismal water was not always enough to remove the stain of having been born a Jew.\(^5\)

Like Luther, many other reformers’ interpretations of the Old Testament referred to Jews, who, according to Christian theology, had once been chosen, but who were chosen no longer. Theologians such as Philip Melanchton, Luther’s right-hand man, and John Calvin, therefore, wrote about Jews and Judaism as quintessentially anti-Christian, yet their words were not as harsh as Luther’s.\(^5\)

Such attitudes were not limited to Protestants. Sixteenth-century Catholics, such as Johann Eck, Luther’s nemesis, wrote against the Jews in language that paralleled Luther’s in its charges and contempt.\(^5\) While he did not issue policy recommendations as Luther did, it should nevertheless be noted that in papal Rome and elsewhere in Italy, the 16th century witnessed the construction of ghettos to which Jews were forced to move. Open during the day but locked at night, the ghettos enclosed and confined the Jewish minority population.\(^5\) Such enclosure of the other, intended to keep the majority society free of impure influences, was typical of 16th-century Europe.\(^5\)

The desire to maintain a pure society is also prominent in the writings of reformer Martin Bucer. Bucer consulted to Philipp, Landgrave of Hesse, who, when the privilege extended to Jews resided in his lands was set to expire in 1538, sought advice about the proper status for Jews. The Jews also wrote to Philipp with their own suggestions regarding the renewal of their privileges.\(^5\) Philipp rejected Bucer’s

---

\(^5\) Elisheva Carlebach, *Divided Souls: Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500–1750* (New Haven, CT, 2001), 60–62.


\(^5\) See, for example, Robert C. Davis and Benjamin C. Ravid, *The Jews of Early Modern Venice* (Baltimore, MD, 2001).


advice, and subsequently, Bucer’s initial advice to Philipp and its rejection were published. The publication of the rejection spurred Bucer to pen a new, even harsher letter about the Jews, in which he called for a Protestant city devoid of Jewish influence. Bucer further recommended that the Talmud be confiscated, that Jews be forced to listen to Christian sermons, and that their synagogues be burned.58

LUTHER’S TREATISES IN THE EYES OF HIS CONTEMPORARIES

Thus, while Luther was by no means alone among Christian theologians in viewing the Jews as Christ’s enemies, and Judaism as irrational practice, the harshness of his words and the specific policies he advocated set him apart from most of his contemporaries. It should not be surprising then that Luther’s later works were not as popular as his other writings. Mark Edwards has shown that only fifteen editions were published of all of the four later treatises. This stands in sharp contrast to That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew, which was reprinted thirteen times.59

Both Catholics and Protestants were highly critical of the later treatises. On the Ineffable Name of God was termed “hateful” and “cruel” by Catholics in 1545.60 Luther’s colleagues in Zurich termed the book “swinish” and “filthy.”61 Even closer colleagues such as Melanchton and Osiander may have distanced themselves from the work.62

That something about Luther’s 1543 works was deemed extreme is best captured by a negotiation between Josel of Rosheim and the magistrates of Strasbourg. A native Alsatian Jew, Josel was in frequent contact with the city magistrates over matters both personal and communal.63 After the publication of On the Jews and Their Lies, Josel turned to the magistrates, beseeching that they censor publication of the treatise in Strasbourg, a major center of print and Protestantism. The magistrates agreed, presumably because they were convinced by Josel’s arguments that

59 Edwards, Luther’s Last Battles, 136.
60 Ibid., 134.
61 Ibid., 135. On Heinrich Bullinger, see Kaufmann, Luther’s Jews, 122.
62 Edwards, Luther’s Last Battles, 135.
the contents were liable to lead to violence and unrest.\textsuperscript{64} That Protestant magistrates would censor the publications of a writer as influential as Luther demonstrates that Luther’s later works were clearly seen by some as beyond the pale.

Contemporary Jews, too, saw Luther and Bucer as antisemitic. Jews in the 16th century were subject to various restrictions. They had been expelled from most cities in the Empire by the second decade of the 16th century. In those cities where they were permitted to live, they were confined to a \textit{Judengasse}, a street locked at night and open during the day. In smaller towns and villages they were subject to quotas, requiring special residence permits that expired and were not always renewed. Jews could not participate in guilds and paid special taxes that were levied only on their community.\textsuperscript{65} The policies for which Bucer and Luther advocated would have destroyed whatever degree of stability these Jews had achieved; even rescinding their right to travel would wreak havoc on their daily lives.

It is not surprising that contemporary Jews condemned these two reformers, and Luther in particular. Josel of Rosheim blamed Luther and Bucer for not helping the Jews in Hesse and Saxony, respectively. While Josel praised Strasbourg’s magistrates and one of its reformers, Wolfgang Capito, in glowing terms, he criticized Bucer and Luther as heretics. For Josel, it was their refusal to help the Jews, and not their Protestant beliefs, that was problematic. A different anonymous Hebrew polemic referred to the “bitterness” that Luther had brought on the Jews.\textsuperscript{66}

By examining 16th-century responses to Luther in the broad context of both Jewish and Christian circles, a more nuanced picture emerges. Luther was by no means alone in his attitudes toward Jews, as negative ideas about Jews and Judaism abounded among theologians and lay-people alike. And yet, even in the context of the 16th century, in which a de facto “tolerance” of the Jews nevertheless included significant restrictions on their daily activities, Jews and some Christians viewed Luther’s antisemitism as extreme.

\textsuperscript{64} Chava Fraenkel-Goldschmidt and Adam Shear, eds., \textit{The Historical Writings of Joseph of Rosheim: Leader of Jewry in Early Modern Germany}, trans. Naomi Schendowich (Leiden, 2006), 400–417.


\textsuperscript{66} On the polemic, see Kaplan, “Sharing Conversations: A Jewish Polemic against Martin Luther,” \textit{Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte} 103.1 (2012), 41–63.
THE IMPACT OF LUTHER’S TREATISES

Despite some initial opposition to Luther’s later tracts, it was not long before they were quoted at length. Already by the 1570s, theologians such as Nikolaus Selnecker of Leipzig and Georg Nigrinus of Hesse quoted extensively from the tracts. In the 17th century, Johann Müller of Hamburg consulted with Strasbourg’s theologians, who cited long verbatim passages from *On the Jews and Their Lies* mere decades after the text had been banned. Luther’s ideas disseminated on a more popular level as well. Depictions of the Wittenberg Judensau were printed, available for viewing well beyond that city. In Strasbourg in 1574, a broadsheet depicting a Jewish woman giving birth to twin piglets – a motif of the Judensau – was accompanied by text based on Luther’s read connecting the pig, Jewish blindness, and the Talmud.

The antisemitism in broadsheets and in theological writings was also expressed in more tangible ways that affected the local Jewish population of the Empire. In the 16th century, a Jew blamed Luther explicitly for the expulsion of the Jews in his native Braunschweig. The Elector of Saxony revoked some of the privileges of Jews, openly citing Luther’s treatises. Philipp of Hesse tightened restrictions on the Jews, as did the Margrave of Neumark. In Strasbourg, relations between Christians and neighboring Jews had been positive in the early years of the Reformation. Jews had entered the city to work, adjudicated at court, and taught reformers Hebrew. Josel of Rosheim had collaborated with Strasbourg’s leaders on more than one occasion. Yet by 1570, when the city became increasingly orthodox, Strasbourg also enacted harsher policies excluding Jews, and publication of antisemitic texts resumed. In 17th-century Hamburg, Lutheran sermons led to unrest for the local Jewish population.

67 Kaufmann, *Luther’s Jews*, 129.
69 Kaufmann, *Luther’s Jews*, 120.
72 Edwards, *Luther’s Last Battles*, 136.
73 Kaplan, “Entangled Negotiations.”
Although some Lutheran theologians, particularly the Pietists, highlighted Luther’s earlier treatises, this was done in an effort to missionize among Jews.\textsuperscript{76}

As Kaufmann describes in detail, Luther’s impact was most deeply felt in the 19th and 20th centuries, when multiple editions of Luther’s later treatises were published by individuals associated with racial antisemitism in Germany; one of these editions sold over 300,000 copies.\textsuperscript{77} The reception of Luther’s work in the 19th and 20th centuries leaves little doubt about how his ideas were later employed. The leading Protestant bishop of Thuringia published 100,000 copies of a pamphlet in 1938, in which he linked Kristallnacht to Luther’s birthday, applauding Luther as a prophet and lauding him as “the greatest anti-Semite of his age.”\textsuperscript{78}

While the reception history of Luther’s writings includes their popularity in Nazi Germany, it is nevertheless ahistorical to refract the 16th century through the lens of the 20th. Although Luther was avidly cited by proponents of Nazi propaganda, his own writings did not include a call for extermination. Luther’s odious call to deprive Jews of their livelihood and to destroy Jewish religious institutions must be seen in the context of the early modern period. His recommendations, although perceived by Christian contemporaries as somewhat extreme, nevertheless reflected certain cultural, theological, and political understandings which can be found in elite contemporary thought and popular culture.

Moreover, an evaluation of the influence wielded by Luther’s antisemitic writings must include not only reactions of Christian audiences. It is imperative to consider contemporary Jewish perceptions of their impact. Luther’s policy recommendations were never implemented on a grand scale, nor could they be in the politically fragmented and religiously divided Empire. They did nevertheless impact policies in a number of regions, upending the rhythms of daily life for Jews. More importantly, Luther’s ideas spread in print, sermons, and artwork. For the Jews of early modern German lands, Luther’s words endangered their already precarious position.

\textsuperscript{77} Kaufmann, \textit{Luther’s Jews}, 137–48, esp. 142.
\textsuperscript{78} As cited in ibid., 148.
Further Reading


Ben-Sasson, H. H., “The Reformation in Contemporary Jewish Eyes,” Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities 4.12 (1971), 239–326. Ben-Sasson discusses Jewish reactions to the Reformation from the Ottoman Empire to the Holy Roman Empire. He includes the theological and messianic interest that the Reformation sparked among some Jewish thinkers as well as the conservative approach of Jews residing in German lands.


Edwards, M. U., Luther’s Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531–46 [Ithaca, NY, 1982]. Edwards analyzes Luther’s works over the last years of his life, arguing that his writings in his later years were increasingly hostile toward Jews and others, providing a wider context to the issue of Luther’s antisemitism.

Gershon, ben J., Ch. Fraenkel-Goldschmidt, and A. Shear, eds., The Historical Writings of Joseph of Rosheim: Leader of Jewry in Early Modern Germany [Leiden, 2006]. An English translation of Josel of Rosheim’s writings, including sources and an excellent introduction to Josel’s interactions with Luther and other Protestant figures.

Hsia, R. P., and H. Lehmann, eds., In and Out of the Ghetto: Jewish-Gentile Relations in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany [Cambridge, 2002]. An anthology of Jewish–Christian relations in Germany, including in the Reformation period. Provides important examples of such interactions from the perspective of intellectual and social history.

Kaplan, D., Beyond Expulsion: Jews, Christians, and Reformation Strasbourg [Stanford, CA, 2011]. A case study of Jewish–Christian relations in Strasbourg, a Protestant city from which Jews were expelled. Kaplan argues that Jews were very much a fabric of early modern European life and that they influenced and were impacted by the Protestant Reformation.

Kaufmann, T., Luther’s Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism, trans. Lesley Sharpe and Jeremy Noakes [Oxford, 2017]. Kaufmann discusses the development of Luther’s attitudes toward the Jews, arguing that they firmly reflected attitudes held by his contemporaries in the 16th century. He also traces the reception of Luther’s antisemitic writings into the 20th century, arguing that how a book was received is an undeniable part of its legacy.

Oberman, H. A., The Roots of Antisemitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation [Philadelphia, 1984]. Oberman traces the development of antisemitism in the 16th century, examining Erasmus, Reuchlin, and Luther. He highlights the influence of Luther’s apocalyptic thinking on his antisemitic writings.
Schramm, B., and K. I. Stjerna, *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis, MN, 2012). An anthology of Luther’s texts about Jews and the Old Testament presenting Luther’s theology and Jews’ place in his biblical exegesis and teachings. The introduction provides vital context for understanding Luther and the Jews.