

## A Messianic Jew looks at Luther – Richard Harvey<sup>1</sup>

For five years now Luther's writings and impact on the Jewish people have burdened me. I have visited Wittenberg three times to protest at the continued offence of the Judensau (Jew-Pig) sculpture on the wall of the Stadtkirche where Luther preached.<sup>2</sup> I am writing two books, "Luther and the Jews: Putting Right the Lies" and "Luther and the Messianic Jews: Strange Theological Bedfellows". One is at a popular level addressing the impact of Luther's legacy of Christian anti-Judaism that influenced the anti-Semitic genocidal program of the National Socialists culminating in the Holocaust. The other brings Lutheran and Messianic Jewish scholars together to engage with each other's differing theological views and traditions.

I grew up in the UK, where the Protestant Reformation resulted in the formation of the Church of England, and where the Anglican Church, like the Lutheran Church around the world, combines elements of Catholic and Reformed tradition. When I became a believer in Jesus my early years of discipleship were within a Protestant Evangelical context<sup>3</sup>, so the works of Luther, his classic statements of the doctrines of justification by faith, the supremacy of scripture and the need for personal faith, were taught as fundamental to the life of a believer.

When I began to study theology in the 1970s there was a revolution in Pauline studies brought about by E P Sanders' book "Paul and Palestinian Judaism"<sup>4</sup> which questioned what he characterized as the "Lutheran reading of Paul" as someone who set Law as revealed in the Old Testament against Gospel and Grace as revealed in the New. My New Testament teacher, John Ziesler, was in regular conversation with Sanders as we worked through the Greek Text of Romans in class. I realized that this "New Perspective on Paul" was good news for Jewish believers in Jesus like myself, who often felt forced to choose between Torah and Messiah, and were accused of legalism and 'going back under the law' if we chose to be Torah-observant as Jesus-believing Jews.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Richard Harvey is Senior Researcher, Jews for Jesus and Associate Lecturer, All Nations Christian College. This article is his personal view and does not represent the views of any other individual or organization. His forthcoming book, *Luther and the Jews: Putting Right the Lies* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, forthcoming) gives full resources.

<sup>2</sup> See "Fjern Wittenbergs jødesvin (Danish)" at [https://www.change.org/p/fjerne-wittenberg-j%C3%B8desvin?source\\_location=topic\\_page](https://www.change.org/p/fjerne-wittenberg-j%C3%B8desvin?source_location=topic_page) and "Remove the Wittenberg Judensau" at <https://www.change.org/p/remove-the-wittenberg-judensau> (English/German).

<sup>3</sup> See "But I'm Jewish: A Jew for Jesus Tells His Story" available online at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/d6n6hni23m95n7x/BIJ%20harvey.pdf?dl=0>

<sup>4</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (UK: SCM Press, 1977).

I was part of the movement of Messianic Judaism and was involved in the London Messianic Congregation in the 1980s. Much of Messianic Jewish theology at the time was in reaction to anti-Jewish elements of Christian theology, particularly the arguments against supersessionism, that the Church had replaced the Jewish people to become the 'new' or 'true' Israel, and repudiated the 'teaching of contempt', that the Jews, because of their crime of deicide, deserved exile and continuing punishment because of their rejection of Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

My encounter with Martin Luther brought into sharp focus the place of Luther in the tradition of Christian anti-Judaism and popular anti-semitism in a way that has challenged my own faith perspective, my ability to forgive Luther and Lutherans for the sufferings brought about by him on my people, and a strong desire to see reconciliation between Lutherans, Jews and Jewish Christians today.

I was staggered to read the anti-Jewish writings of Luther. His constant litany of abuse, insult, hatred and hostility against Jews and Judaism is shocking and unacceptable. His vicious, obscene and inflammatory language is inexcusable. His mixing of racial and religious hatred, his claims to be based on Scripture and the teaching of Christ and the Apostles, his murderous threats and poisonous accusations and libels against the Jewish people are probably the worst examples ever of Christian anti-Judaism. He mocks Jewish respect for the sacred name of God and argues that the Talmud comes out of a pig's anus.<sup>6</sup>

No wonder his works were praised and republished by the Nazis, who claimed he would be proud of their actions on Kristallnacht (1939)<sup>7</sup> and appealed to him for justification of their actions in their defense at Nuremberg (1945)<sup>8</sup>. He argues that the Jews should be thrown out of Germany, their property confiscated, their books burnt, their synagogues destroyed, and they should be given no safety. He backed up his inflammatory language with repeated attempts to persuade German leaders to carry out this program. His theological anti-Judaism and social and political anti-Semitism cannot be disentangled or excused.

---

<sup>5</sup> For a survey of Messianic Jewish Theology see Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach* (UK: Paternoster/Authentic Media, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> "On the Ineffable Name and on the Lineage of Christ" (1543) in Kirsi I. Stjerna and Brooks Schramm, 177-180.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Harvey, "On November 10, 1938, on Luther's birthday, the synagogues are burning in Germany" available online at <https://messianicjewishhistory.wordpress.com/2014/11/10/otdimjh-on-november-10-1938-on-luthers-birthday-the-synagogues-are-burning-in-germany/>.

<sup>8</sup> Julius Streicher's defence statement, 29<sup>th</sup> April 1945, "Dr. Martin Luther would very probably sit in my place in the defendants' dock today, if this book had been taken into consideration by the Prosecution. In the book *The Jews and Their Lies*, Dr. Martin Luther writes that the Jews are a serpent's brood and one should burn down their synagogues and destroy them..." online at <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/04-29-46.asp>

There are two commonly believed myths about Luther's views on the Jewish people, neither of which are correct but in some way are used to justify what in my opinion are Luther's inexcusable attitudes to the Jewish people. The first is that Luther started off his ministry with a positive attitude to the Jewish people, believing that they would, if treated considerately, become true believers in Jesus and aid him in his struggles against the Roman Catholic church. The second is that Luther, for all his anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism, finally repented of these sins on his deathbed.

Whilst it is correct that Luther's early works, especially "That Jesus Christ was born a Jew" have some positive statements about how Jewish people should be treated, and that the means of persuasion he advised that did then include sanctions and violence against them, from his earliest writings such as his lectures on the Psalms and on Genesis Luther uses an anti-Jewish polemic that he inherited as an Augustinian monk from Augustine's belief that the Jews were condemned to be 'reluctant witnesses' of the truth of Christianity by their rejection of Jesus and consequent sentence and punishment to be a 'wandering people' within Christendom.

As for the imagined death-bed repentance, whilst it is true that Luther confessed his sins, his hatred, fear and attacks on the Jewish people persisted right up to the time of his final sermons a few days before he died. In his imagination it was the Jews who were attacking him, trying to kill him, and against whom in his final public sermons and private words to his wife he gave admonitions and vitriolic condemnations.

There are strains of theological anti-Judaism and popular anti-Semitism running throughout Luther's life and works.<sup>9</sup> Theologically, because the Jewish interpretation of Scripture as handed down by rabbinic tradition denies that Jesus is Messiah such interpretations must be opposed by Luther's own method of translating, interpreting and applying scripture. 'On the Jews and their Lies' is a 65,000-word tirade against the Jewish people and their interpretation of scripture, particularly their interpretation of the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, which Luther attempts to show have been fulfilled in the coming of Christ. For Luther, the continuing exile of the Jewish people from their land for the past 1500 years is a further proof of the condemnation and judgment of God upon them.

So what is my Messianic Jewish perspective in Luther?

---

<sup>9</sup> Two books in particular are recommended for this topic amongst the myriad of publications on Luther and the Jews: Thomas Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism*, (German original *Luthers Juden*, Philipp Reclam jun. GmbH, Verlag, ISBN: 9783150109984, 2014, English translation, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017) and Kirsi I. Stjerna and Brooks Schramm (eds.) *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People: A Reader* (USA: Fortress Press, 2014). They introduce the reader to the world and writings of Martin Luther and the Jews, to help them form their own opinion of the subject.

First, it recognizes all the good that Luther did. His bold and faithful proclamation of the Gospel, his willingness to stand against the abuses and evils of the Church of his day, his contribution to the development of the Reformation and the modern world, his introduction of the Bible into the vernacular language, his influence on the formation of the modern world and the nation state, his development of popular Christian life and culture. All these things I affirm and appreciate Luther's contribution.

Second, it offers forgiveness. For my people, Luther's Antijudaism cannot and should not be separated from later Anti-Semitism that culminated in the Holocaust, the genocidal murder of 6 million of my people, and 6 million others (communists, homosexuals, Jehovah's `witnesses, the disabled and mentally ill, travellers and others). My people still suffer from a multi-generational post-traumatic stress that has equally unfortunate and unintended consequences such as the victimized becoming the victimizer, particularly in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – another tortuous and complex subject. So reconciliation, first between German Christians and Messianic Jews, and then more widely between Jews and Lutherans, is greatly needed. Sadly I have observed little of this, and find that many Lutherans just do not understand how Jewish people and Jewish believers in Jesus feel. This grieves me greatly, as I would like my family, most of who do not believe in Jesus, to hear genuinely good news from Lutherans, or at least an expression of regret, a note of apology, and a willingness to do something to put matters right.

I pray daily the prayer of forgiveness that an orthodox Jew prays from the Jewish prayer book, and which echoes closely the words of Jesus on the cross ' Father forgive them, they know not what they do". It goes:

"I hereby forgive anyone who has angered or provoked me or sinned against me, physically or financially or by failing to give me due respect, or in any other matter relating to me, involuntarily or willingly, inadvertently or deliberately, whether in word or deed: let no one incur punishment because of me."<sup>10</sup>

Third, it calls for repentance and the fruits of repentance

After 500 hundred years of Luther's Antijudaism, and thousands of years' of Christian anti-semitism, Lutherans need to go out of their way to show the Love of Yeshua to his people Israel. I am waiting for that to happen, and have yet to see evidence of it. One very powerful symbol of Luther's Antijudaism, the Wittenberg Judensau, should be removed with a public act of repentance, and placed in a study centre rather than left on the wall of a church building dedicated to the worship of God.

The city of Wittenberg contains a Judensau (Jew-Pig) from 1305, on the facade of the Stadtkirche, the church where Martin Luther preached. It portrays a rabbi who looks under the sow's tail, and other Jews drinking from its teats. An

---

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Sacks, (Jerusalem: Koren Siddur, 2009), p.294-295.

inscription reads "Rabini Shem hamphoras," gibberish which presumably bastardises "shem ha-meforasch" ("The fully pronounced Name [of God]). The sculpture is one of many still remaining in Germany. In Vom Schem Hamphoras (1543), Luther comments on the Judensau sculpture at Wittenberg, echoing the antisemitism of the image and locating the Talmud in the sow's bowels:

"Here on our church in Wittenberg a sow is sculpted in stone. Young pigs and Jews lie suckling under her. Behind the sow a rabbi is bent over the sow, lifting up her right leg, holding her tail high and looking intensely under her tail and into her Talmud, as though he were reading something acute or extraordinary, which is certainly where they get their Shemhamphoras."

When I first saw this sculpture in Wittenberg, it cause me deep distress. I wrote the following: (THIS WILL BE PLAYED TO MUSIC AND ENGLISH LYRICS IN THE POWERPOINT –

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/45qdfey9jcxga91/The%20Lament.m4v?dl=0>)

*Lament over the Wittenberg Judensau<sup>11</sup>*

*I sit on the steps by the side of the church  
And I weep  
In my heart I descend to despair and to rage  
And I weep  
My mouth cannot speak the unsayable words  
As I ponder the depths of the pain and the shock  
The horror and the rage and the anger and trauma  
And I weep*

*A bell sounds the hour  
The children pass by  
The tourists and cyclists  
The men at their work  
The women on their way  
And I weep*

*How could centuries of hatred be summed up  
In such an obscene cartoon, a murderous joke  
A scandalous, depraved image  
Making fun of my people, my self, my soul, my Messiah*

*How could Israel be so profaned among the nations  
That the name of God himself, ha shem mephoras  
Be turned into the Shame meant for us*

---

<sup>11</sup> Richard Harvey, June 2016.

*I weep*

*How can those who call themselves followers of Messiah  
Worship in this place – when on the wall is such an obscene insult to His  
people?*

*How can those who say “That Jesus Christ was born a Jew”*

*Make Jewish babies breastfeed from a pig?*

*How can Jews believe the Jews’ Good News*

*When this building shows them wallowing in pig’s filth and excrement?*

*I weep*

*How could I worship God in such a place that has been so desecrated by  
such filth?*

*How could God be present in such a place where His name is so  
dishonoured?*

*Cleanse this place O Lord, redeem it, set it free from its legacy of hatred,  
contempt and abuse of your own character and people.*

*Change this place, O Lord, to be a place where your Gospel is truly  
proclaimed,*

*And Jewish people could feel welcomed, not despised*

*And Yeshua himself, the Jewish Messiah, could dwell in this place by your  
Spirit’s presence.*

*For godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation and brings no  
regret*

*But worldly grief produces death*

*Lord, have mercy on your people –on your people Israel, and on your church  
Pardon us, forgive us, renew us, cleanse us, heal us, reconcile us, restore us*

*Lord have mercy*

*Yeshua Hamashiach Adonai – Rachem Na – Alai – Choteh*

The sculpture continues to cause offence and defame Jewish people and their faith. It needs to be removed to another location so it is not publicly displayed on the external wall of the church, and properly housed and explained elsewhere. Otherwise Jewish people continue to experience the antisemitic power of such an abusive image, and their worst fears about the nature of the Christian faith are confirmed. If the Church is truly repentant over such images, it must take steps to remove them from such prominent display.

Not only is the sculpture an insult to Jewish people, but it offends common decency by its lewd portrayal of Jews suckling a pig and putting a hand up its rump. It also is an affront to a place of Christian worship which should be decorated with dignity and decorum, not obscenity and shocking anti-semitic images.

The Wittenberg Judensau continues to offend as a powerful and vivid portrayal of hate speech and antisemitism. The attempt to address this by placing an [explanation](#) and [commemorative plaque](#) beneath the sculpture in 1988 by sculptor Wieland Schmiedel beneath it is insufficient. The explanation states: "The true name of God, the maligned Chem Ha Mphoras which Jews long before Christianity regarded as almost unutterably holy, this name died with six million Jews, under the sign of the Cross."

We appreciate the fact that the church decided to do something to explain and express regret, but do not believe God died in the Holocaust, and this is again an improper use of the name of God.

In 2017, the 500th anniversary of Luther's launching of the Protestant Reformation, it is time to remove this statue and replace it with something more honouring to the God of Israel, respectful of the Jewish people, and bringing dignity to a Christian place of worship instead of retaining a sculpture that is unseemly, obscene, insulting, offensive, defamatory, libellous, blasphemous, anti-semitic and inflammatory.

So I am waiting for Lutherans, both as church bodies and as individuals, to show the fruits and action of repentance. Many expressions of regret and remorse have been made over the years for the sufferings of the Jewish people, but few actual acts of repentance, requests for forgiveness and demonstrations of a new heart, attitudes and actions to restore relations between Jews and Lutherans.

Fourth, it looks for the reconciliation that only Yeshua can bring. Messianic Jews and Lutherans have one thing in common – we both believe in Jesus/Yeshua, the Son of God who took on Jewish flesh, who died on the cross and rose again from the dead to reconcile us to God and to reconcile us to one another. We are called to be God's ambassadors of reconciliation to the world, and this must begin between the divided peoples, ethnicities and histories that we have within the *ekklesia*, the Body of Christ. When I get to heaven I look forward to embracing Martin Luther and thanking him for blessing me. I hope he too will embrace me with tears of repentance in his eyes, and we will be truly reconciled together in the love and fellowship of the God of Israel and all nations.

Messianic Jews, as members of both the Jewish and Christian communities, are uniquely, ideally and unenviably placed to call both sides to reconciliation through repentance. We feel the pain of both. Our Jewish people have suffered through the antijudaism of Luther that fed the currents of antisemitism that led to the Nazi's final solution. Christians, especially in Germany today, still feel guilty and defiled by the Churches' failure to resist, and consider it their duty to remember the past, but with heavy hearts and unrelieved burdens. Jewish believers in Jesus are poised to share the pain of both, and bring healing and reconciliation to both through the Messiah Yeshua's love for Israel and all nations.

Powerpoint -

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/hwdl1fzd7ads7d1/Helsinki%20Poland%20powerpoint%20050617a.pptx?dl=0>

(2726/3052 words)

