
SYNOD RESOLUTION, NOVEMBER 2014

A resolution of the Synod of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau which clearly distances from Martin Luther's anti-jewish writings.



**„Therefore,
away with
them!“**

**Luther's
Fall with
regard to
the Jews**

**An exhibition in English Language
which can be rented.**

**All informations and accompanying material
in internet under**

www.imdialog.org/ausstellungen/luther_english/

ImDialog -

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We must receive them cordially – First, set fire to their synagogues and schools.

Martin Luther's Anti-Jewish Writings

Located on the outside wall of the parish church in Wittenberg, where the iconic figure of the Reformation Martin Luther regularly preached, is a depiction of the so-called *Judensau*. The “Jewish sow“, sculpted in 1305, portrays a rabbi peering under a sow’s tail, together with other Jews drinking from its teats. The sculpture on the Stadtkirche is one of some 25 remaining examples in Germany of medieval Jew-baiting.

In his vituperative tract, *Vom Schem Hamphoras* (1543), Luther himself comments on the sculpture, echoing the anti-semitism of his age: “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 and viewing something spicy and special...“

No less mean-spirited than the mockery of Judaism portrayed in the sculpture of the Jewish sow, are the so-called *Judenschriften* – the anti-Jewish writings Martin Luther penned between 1538 and 1543. Using the most inflammatory rhetoric imaginable, Luther rails against the refusal of the Jews of his time to accept the Gospel as presented in the Reformation teachings. So outraged was the Reformer at the Jews’ apparent refusal to convert that he urged not only that they be expelled from his hometown of Eisleben, but that their synagogues and schools be burned. This stands in sharp contrast to other writings in which Luther urged cordiality and benevolence toward the Jews.

The anti-Jewish tracts are both tragic and puzzling, particularly in light of Luther’s earlier willingness to defend the Jews from inhuman treatment. While the offensiveness of the Reformer’s remarks goes beyond even the common coarseness and virulent anti-Jewish sentiments of the times, it may be argued that Martin Luther’s position was primarily religious in nature, as opposed to being racially motivated.

On the eve of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the Synod of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau took the laudable and necessary step of adopting a resolution which clearly distances the Church from Luther’s anti-Jewish writings. Without diminishing the far-reaching vision and enormous achievements of Martin Luther, the Synod made it clear that the anti-Jewish writings are in no way commensurate with the Church’s understanding of the Scriptures and the Gospel of Jesus Christ today.

Already in 1991, the Protestant Church had broadened the corresponding article in its constitution so as to reaffirm the abiding election of the Jews and God’s covenant with them. Last fall, the Protestant Church, which had previously asked its Theological Committee to draft a document in which the Church officially dissociates itself from the anti-Jewish statements made by Luther in his later years, passed the resolution presented by the committee, recommending it for adoption and further use by the Protestant Church at the national level (EKD).

The Church President and the Präses (Chairperson) of the Synod of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau, Dr. Volker Jung and Dr. Ulrich Oelschläger, respectively, went a step further in requesting that the synod resolution be translated into English, so as to carry the church’s witness far beyond the borders of Hesse and Nassau. The English translation is presented herewith in the hope that it will encourage understanding and reconciliation among wider groups of people, spark fruitful discussion and give new expression to the hallmark of the Reformation: “*Ecclesia semper reformanda.*“

Reformed and always reforming. The often-quoted motto of the Reformation bestows hope that even within the darkest moments of history, light - pure, healing and illuminating - may stream forth: the very light, as Martin Luther himself knew, in which we see light.

Jeffrey Myers



Photo: *Judensau* on the Wittenberg Parish Church



The “Theological Committee of the 11th Church Synod of the EKHN” approved this resolution on October 10th, 2014. It was presented to the Church Synod for consultation, reception and additional consideration in preparation for the commemoration of “25 Years Following the Broadening of the Article of Our Church Constitution.”

The Church Synod unanimously adopted the committee’s recommendation one month later.

Dr. theol. Jeffrey Myers, Office “500th Reformation Anniversary“

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Synod of the Evangelische Kirche in Hessen und Nassau (EKHN)

Martin Luther’s Anti-Jewish Writings in Light of the EKHN-Doctrinal Statement (1991) and the Reformation Anniversary (2017)

[1] Martin Luther and his theology have not only significantly influenced the Lutheran churches, but also Protestantism as a whole. Therefore, the Protestant Churches in Germany - in anticipation of the anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 - cannot simply ignore Luther’s stance toward the Judaism in his time, particularly as this position finds expression in his anti-Jewish writings (the so-called *Judenschriften*). We are grateful to those in the Evangelical Churches who have critically illuminated this difficult legacy during recent decades.

[2] The following statements pertaining to Luther’s anti-Jewish writings are not intended to call into question Luther’s significant meaning for the history and theology of Protestantism. However, they do want to underscore the point that Luther’s relationship to Judaism, as reflected in his anti-Jewish writings, is neither a chance occurrence nor a marginal variable within his Reformation efforts or his theological thought. Rather, Luther’s stance incorporates a widespread contemporary anti-Judaism and connects it with central tenets of his theology, particularly regarding the doctrine of justification. It also provides guidelines for implementation, which the anti-semitism of the common people could draw upon.

Luther’s anti-Jewish writings in their historical and theological context

[3] In the 16th century, among supporters as well as opponents of the Reformation and at all levels of society, it was widely held “that the Jews were in a pact with the devil; in a ‘parasitic’ way, especially through usury practices, sucking the people dry who gave them a place to live (*“Wirtsvölker”*), secretly forming pacts with the Turks, serving for them as spies, and by means of magical practices relentlessly vilifying Christ and Mary, making proselytes and undermining the Christian community” (Thomas Kaufmann, *Handbuch des Anti-semitismus*, 2010). This is well illustrated by the so-called “Reuchlin affair“ during the years leading up to the Reformation: As opposed to Johannes Pfefferkorn, who converted from Judaism to Christianity, the humanistic Hebraist Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522), questioned (in his “*Augenspiegel*”, literally “*Ophthalmoscope*” - 1511) calls to burn Jewish writings. This earned him the vehement backing of the humanists as well as large public support, including many later supporters of the Reformation. Their sympathy, however, was limited, owing in large measure to a one-sided interest in ancient philology. Calls continued for the baptism of Jews and for their confession of Jesus as the Messiah. In fact, this stance escalated into an explicit anti-Judaism among the humanists, such as in the case of Erasmus of Rotterdam.

[4] Martin Luther composed his anti-Jewish writings without closer contact to the Jewish people, and didn’t bother to become better acquainted with them either. The Jews were primarily of interest to him as a witness to divine activity in history. For him they were a religion, which – like the papacy and Islam – was guided by self-justification and meritorious conduct and thus served as a contrast to Christian self-identity.

[5] In the early years of the Reformation, the “eschatological turning point” seen by many supporters of the ideas of the Reformation - particularly following the publication of Luther’s treatise, “That Jesus Christ is a born Jew” (*Daß Jesus Christus ein geborner Jude sei*, 1523) - entailed the expectation that the “breakthrough of the Word of God“ would, in the end, also include segments of the Jewish population. Luther called both for an end to the traditional reproach against the Jews, which, in his view, had been supported by the misguided doctrine of the Roman Church, and for presenting Christian teaching in its pure and undistorted form. Such expectations contributed at the very least to Protestant attitudes toward Judaism becoming polyphonic, mixing in more Jewish-friendly tones during the early years of the Reformation. Nonetheless, there exists a clear continuity between Luther’s treatise of 1523, composed in a friendlier tone, and the later



writings between 1538 and 1543 with their vehemence: “Against the Sabbatarians” (*Wider die Sabbather*, 1538); “On the Jews and Their Lies” (*Von den Juden und ihren Lügen*, 1543); “On Schem Hamphoras” (*Vom Schem Hamphoras*, 1543); “On the Last Words of David” (*Von den letzten Worten Davids*, 1543). Luther’s explicit hatred of the Jews demonstrates a clear continuity: the relationship to Christ and faith in the justification of the sinner ruled out in his eyes a separate and enduring election of the Jews by God. Luther saw this affirmed in the massive suffering of Jews after the crucifixion of Jesus, which he interpreted as punishment for the rejection of the Messiah by the Jews.

[6] With the territorial development and expansion of the Reformation, Protestant theologians and rulers saw themselves as increasingly responsible for the low number of conversions, which the new Reformation teaching was supposed to produce among the Jewish citizenry. This took place also against the backdrop of Catholic and anti-Jewish polemic, as evidenced, for example, in the book by the convert Antonius Margaritha, “The Whole Jewish Belief” (*Der gantz jüdisch glaub*, 1530). From the latter part of the 1530’s, Luther propagated the decidedly anti-Jewish policy of the territorial rulers. With his later anti-Jewish writings, he sought to pressure the rulers to expel the Jews, and was not afraid to call for violent action, nor to make the most malicious statements. Under the measures initiated by Luther and others, the “Jewish policy” of the Reformation territories returned mainly to the pre-Reformation stance of moving back and forth between the practice of limited tolerance and expulsion.

The reception of Luther’s anti-Jewish writings in Protestantism

[7] Up until the 19th century, Luther’s later anti-Jewish writings were not widely adopted. Particularly in Pietism there arose, largely under the advent of a new eschatology and a related expectation of Jewish conversion, a friendlier position regarding fellow Jewish citizens (Spener, Zinzendorf), and in individual cases even criticism of Luther’s anti-Jewish writings (Gottfried Arnold). Luther’s late anti-Jewish writings still played a minor role for the racist anti-Semitism that emerged in the 19th century. Following World War I., however, and particularly among the National Socialist opponents and proponents of Christianity, the appeal of these writings gained in importance; they also influenced biblical interpretation by Christian commentators, especially within the German cultural circle. Even during the Nuremberg Trials, Julius Streicher referred to Luther as an important source of the inflammatory anti-Semitic propaganda. This changeful history of Luther’s anti-Jewish writings makes clear that the Protestant Church must take a clear position regarding these writings.

Criticism and dissociation from Luther’s anti-Jewish writings

[8] The main thrust of Luther’s Reformation thought is grounded in the interpretation of Holy Scripture. This lends considerable weight - common at that time - to the reception of a Christological understanding of the Old Testament and the uncritical interpretation of the anti-Jewish passages of the New Testament. Luther’s interpretation of so-called Messianic passages of the Old Testament in particular is not in keeping with contemporary historical-critical exegesis, and - from the perspective of reader-response criticism - especially not commensurate with the multiple meanings of biblical texts.

[9] In self-critical moments, Luther was clearly aware of the limited scope of his theology and his church work. Tensions within his theology as well as contradictions between theology and church practice came to light especially when he disputed with opponents, whom he identified as eschatological enemies (papacy, Turks, Anabaptists, Judaism): Just as his stance toward the Anabaptists of the Reformation was difficult to harmonize with his insistence upon the bonding of the conscience to the written Word, so is his stance toward the Judaism of his day, as evidenced in his anti-Jewish writings, not compatible with the witness of Scripture to the enduring election of Israel.

[10] The idea of an abiding election of Israel and the faithfulness of God toward his people remained closed to Martin Luther with his tight grip on passages in the Old Testament critical of Israel. In his later anti-Jewish writings, he denied Judaism the status of the people of God, pointing to the wrath of God over the Jewish people during the previous 1,500 years. The Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau expressly rejects this view as articulated in the broadened Article of the Church Constitution (1991): “Called to repentance because of blindness and guilt, the church witnesses anew to the lasting election of the Jews and to God’s covenant with them. The declaration of faith in Jesus Christ includes this witness.” The declaration of faith in Jesus Christ includes - and is included by - this witness.

The church governing body shall circulate this draft to all congregations, asking that they draw upon these deliberations in an appropriate manner within the context of events planned for the Luther Decade.

We use the term “Judaism” reluctantly. Alternatively, one could also use the neologism “Jewry” (*Judenheit*, cf. e.g. Thomas Kaufmann).