

LUTHER--NEITHER AN ANTI-SEMITE
NOR A LACKEY OF THE PRINCES

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MERCURY

Before me lie two clippings from the debate page of the Gothenburg Post, both of which deal with Luther. In the one, "Luther--A Prophet in the East" (7/3), Otto Salomon points at Luther as one of "the most merciless persecutors of the Jewish people." In the other, "Conscience Drove Luther to Become a Lackey for Tyrants" (8/3), Goeren Molden depicts Luther as a servant of the princes who was "compelled to carry out his reformation on their terms." "He was compelled to ally himself with the lecherous, syphlitic Philip of Hesse and bless his bigamy." The point of both articles is very likely a warning in view of the Luther jubilee, which is about to take place. On decisive points Luther seems to be an immoral person, according to Salomon, the forerunner of Hitler. Molden takes a more moderate view but nevertheless raises serious questions about Luther's person.

As a Luther scholar it is important for me to correct the picture which is presented for the readers of the Gothenburg Post by both of these articles. I think that it is very mistaken and that the mistake can easily be shown for every reader in a convincing way.

Salomon's article, which I have chose to deal with first, contains serious errors already in regard to the background of Luther's statements. Even if Salomon had interpreted Luther correctly, he ought to have made clear that Luther in what he says is to be seen only as a part of a movement which was part of almost all of the Europe of his time. In 1421 the Jews were driven out of Austria, in 1424 from Cologne, in 1432 from Saxony, in 1449 from Augsburg, in 1450 from Bavaria, and up to 1499 from Mechlenburg, Magdeburg, and Nuernberg. In that connection one should bear in mind that these various cities often included much of the surrounding territory. One can thus maintain, as one scholar does, that Germany in Luther's time, with few exceptions, had no Jews at all, and that the Jews had already for a long time been subject to particularly harsh legal provisions. In Saxony, Luther's homeland, the restrictions on Jews antedated Luther's birth by 50 years. Luther can thus hardly be the instigator of any persecution. At worst he must thus be described as a child of his time.

Lackey of the Princes
anti-semitic
not a
Luther

A Necessary Definition

Before we go further, it is important to define our terms, for without such a definition the discussion will become totally unrealistic. Salomon in his article speaks about "anti-Semitism," and he made no distinction between that term and "anti-Jewish." For the Middle Ages as well as for Luther the racial concept "Semite" obviously did not exist in any negative sense. When they polemicized against the Jews they thought of a religious group with specific doctrines. In principle they took the same position over against the Jews as they did, e.g. against the Mohammedans. The Darwinian notion concerning races of varying value was completely foreign to that time and cannot be read into our texts. If a Jew became baptized he was in principle of equal worth with others (even if in the Middle Ages in certain cases baptized Jews were suspected of continuing secretly in their former faith).

In the question of Luther's own attitude Salomon makes mistakes in judgment which are just as serious. Salomon would have us believe that Luther gave up his earlier favorable attitude toward Judaism after he devoted himself to the task of

translating the New Testament, the anti-Jewish attitude of which now became his. That statement is easy to refute. It was at the Wartburg, where the Bible translation was made, that Luther wrote his commentary on the Magnificat of Mary which is characterized as friendly to the Jews. There he said, "Therefore we ought not to deal in such an unfriendly way with the Jews... Who wants to become a Christian when he sees Christians treat men in such an un-Christian way?" This work, which was published in 1521, and reprinted many times, had its sequel in "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," in which the church of the Middle Ages was attacked for having treated the Jews "as dogs and not as men." "If we want to help them then we must not exercise the law of the pope but the law of Christian love and act in a friendly way toward them." This work came out in 1523 and was reprinted nine times in the same year. Salomon's statement that Luther after Wartburg "stands out as one of the most merciless persecutors of the Jewish people" lacks support in the facts.

Here there is reason to question the argument that it was acquaintance with the New Testament that led Luther into an anti-Jewish point of view. Here Salomon is in reality not attacking Luther but the New Testament and on this point he appeals to the Bible Commission's commentary on the New Testament. (!) The situation is this that Luther carried on his translation of the New Testament into German after lecturing on the New Testament for eight years and in the course of those lectures he practically memorized the Latin text. During this time Luther recommended that one ought to meet the Jews with kindness and friendliness. Why can this not be evidence that the study of the biblical texts produces a friendly attitude toward the Jews? Why should the biblical text only be a cause of an inimical attitude toward the Jews--which, moreover, did not exist at that time in Luther? It seems that Salomon did not strive for an unbiased judgment.

We now come to what can rightly be called Luther's anti-Jewish work, "On the Jews and their Lies," published in 1543. We here have to do, not with, as Salomon thinks, a "circular letter" to "the princes who joined themselves to the Reformation," but with a book printed in Wittenburg in the usual way. Here we find the seven points cited by Salomon, in which Luther gives the advice that the synogogs should be torn down, that the homes of the Jews should likewise be destroyed, that the Jews should be housed in camps, that the Talmudic writings should be confiscated, that the rabbis should be forbidden to teach, that the Jews should be forbidden to travel, that the Jews should be prevented from loaning money, that they be deprived of their property, and finally that the Jews according to their abilities should be assigned to menial service.

Without a proper background no one can understand what Luther says here. The most important point to keep in mind ought to be that Luther, whose views concerning religious freedom were remarkably liberal for those times both in theory and practice, took, the same attitude toward other non-conformist religions. One can here cite what is said in the Preface to the Small Catechism:

"For those who do not want to learn these things [catechism] should be told that they are denying Christ and are not Christians... Such people should be denied food and drink by their parents and masters and say about them that the authorities ought to drive such rude men out of the country, etc. For while we cannot and should not force anyone to believe, nevertheless people should be trained to know what is right and wrong among those people with

whom they want to dwell and make their living. For he who wants to live in a city should recognize and keep the laws of that city under which he wants to live, irrespective of whether he agrees with it or is inwardly a rascal and a cheat."

The Christian government thus has a duty to see to it that there is unity of religion in the country. Luther has here drawn conclusions which must be seen as honorable and respectable: "If the government is not Lutheran, then my Lutherans should gladly prepare to travel" (1530 Commentary on Psalm 82). "If the authorities do not tolerate the pastor who is chosen and salaried by them, let him flee to another city and let those who want to, flee with him, as Christ teaches" (Admonition to Peace, 1525). It is therefore not only Jews, Baptists and Roman Catholics who can be forced to flee and leave everything, but also Dr. Martin Luther himself and his Lutherans.

What is liberal in Luther's point of view is that he does not believe that the state has any control over men's faith and thoughts. What he says applies only to the outward religious practice and no inquisition, which searches out secret opinions, is possible. That is maintained also in "The Jews and Their Lies": "For what one for himself does not believe, negatively or positively, this we leave to every man's conscience, but that one should openly before our very eyes and ears praise such unbelief as true--this is something completely different... Such things they can say in their own country or secretly, but in our country and before our ears they must keep such words to themselves." With those words the Roman Catholic sacrifice of the mass and also rabbinical theology is forbidden, without at the same time permitting anyone's heart and reins to be examined.

All legal action in such questions are for Luther subject to the government's decision. It is said expressly that no private person may take any action damaging to Jews: "Nor that one should berate them soundly or do them personal harm... One should let the government deal with them." As far as the various actions mentioned in the seven points are concerned one must be aware that the Jews to the extent that they were allowed to remain in a place as an exception were subject to the laws governing aliens and already as such formed an exceptional group. Luther's word did not create that situation but proceeds from the fact that at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, e.g., the Jews were once more ordered to wear distinctive clothing and their money lending was made subject to certain provisions and at the same time Jews were assigned to simply manual labor. In that connection one ought also to bear in mind that in that time all men had to fill certain prescriptions concerning permissible actions or clothing. When Mrs. Luther appeared in silk she did that as the wife of a doctor of noble birth and by virtue of law. Such were the times.

It can be correctly maintained that the charge against the Jews contain an attack that had special significance just for them as a group. That is true e.g. of the charge of usury. That should not be understood as invective proceeding from ill-will. Entirely aside from the Jewish question Luther maintained during his whole life that the taking of interest was usury and punishable. In his writing of 1540 "To the Pastors, to Preach against Usury," Luther makes clear that those who take interest must be treated as excommunicants and not be given the sacraments or a church funeral. This attitude also underlies Luther's criticism of the Fugger Bank, which through its theological consultant, Luther's enemy Eck, introduced a moderate taking of interest in Germany as permissible. Luther recommended civil action against the Fuggers. (Luther's criticism

does not apply to present-day interest which is based on corporate dividends, where the dividends never become greater than the actual profit.) According to their religion the Jews possessed a right to collect interest from outsiders and were therefore criminals in Luther's view and dangerous to the community. The demand that the Jews should pay back what they had collected in interest has for Luther a basis in law and Luther's attack on them on this point has its parallels in the attitude toward non-Jews. One can also cite how Luther, in "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," in 1520 demanded that the papal nuncios should be chased out of the German lands because of their extortions of money.

Another charge also should be examined more closely. Behind Luther's protests against the pretensions of the Jews to be lords, and their contempt for Christians, there lies nothing else than his discovery that rabbinic theology of that time had a different view of the Messiah than the Christians, that they therefore had in mind a usurpation of power in this world in which a Jewish Messiah would triumph over the Gentiles, which included also the Electorate of Saxony. For Luther this implied the same kind of destruction of the community as the millennium of the enthusiasts in Muenster. Thus we can also in this find nothing specifically anti-Jewish.

In short we can in summarizing say that Luther's point of view in the Jewish question did not rise out of any special feelings on his part nor is it corrupted by unworthy emotions. His words are dictated by principles which governed him also in other areas and which in comparison with the times in which he lived were broadminded and made room for the individual conscience. Their negative effects he was willing to accept even if they were turned against him and his own followers.

Molden's article contains more of an appreciation of Luther and of a historical approach. The author is also naturally less personally involved in the subject than Salomon. A Marxist shift in perspective must be demonstrated. The chief thesis, that Luther's rejection of the peasants in the Peasant Uprising placed him into shameful dependence on the princes is easy to shoot down. In the research there are plenty of case studies of the various occasions in which Luther alone or with his colleagues on the faculty were asked to give an opinion in political questions in which the evangelical princes were engaged. Sometimes we meet with conflicts in which Luther was not able to carry through his point of view, but he never hesitated to disagree with the princes. In some cases Luther opposed the war plans and succeeded in stopping a war of aggression or a preventive war. He makes clear that soldiers in a war of aggression must refuse to obey. Molden mentions Philip of Hesse with whom Luther supposedly was forced to ally himself. Also if the alliance in the first place concerns the Hessian marriage deal, it can be of interest to note that it was just Philip of Hesse who found himself in constant conflict with Luther! The closing words of a recent dissertation dealing with Luther's attitude toward the politics of the princes contains a quotation from Philip of Hesse who said ironically, "Mr. Doktor, you give good advice, but what do you say if we will not follow it?" Here speak conflict and tension, by no means subservience on Luther's part.

The often repeated charge against Luther that he compromised his conscience when he permitted Philip of Hesse's bigamy is clearly contradicted by the historical evidence. Already some years before the Hessian marriage problem Luther expressed the opinion that under certain conditions bigamy might be permitted. This is not the place to discuss the biblical exegesis on which Luther bases

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that conclusion, but it ought to be remembered outstanding Roman Catholic theologians of that time shared Luther's opinion on this point. It is impossible to charge Luther with making special concessions to Philip of Hesse; he was only following a conviction to which he had come at an earlier time. Luther is, on the contrary, inexorably severe against Philip of Hesse just in that document in which he together with many other theologians discusses the impending marriage. With direct reference to Philip's immoral life, it is said that adulterers and whoremongers shall not inherit the kingdom of God. In order to save Philip from that fate, he is allowed to practise bigamy since he according to his own confession was unable to live in marital relationship with his wife. Some outward legal restrictions did not allow the marriage, which legally became a concubinage.

Just as in the Jewish question, Luther's action against the background of the historical evidence is clearly consistent and respectable. We find no unworthy fear of the great men of this world but, on the contrary, manly stature and dignity. We can celebrate the coming Luther jubilee with a good conscience.

by Dr. Tom G. A. Hardt, Stockholm, Sweden

translated by Dr. Siegbert W. Becker