Chapter 2

Martin Luther’s Antipathy toward Jews and the Attitudes of Danish Reformers

The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century

Martin Luther and the Jews

In his early lectures on the Psalms of David (1513–1515) and on the Epistle to the Romans (1515–1516), Martin Luther (1483–1546) attacked both “the rabbis” and any Christians who merely took historical views of the Old Testament, for it must be seen Christologically. Psalms, prophecies, even the historical books must be interpreted so that they point to Christ, and those who do not understand this—namely Jews, heretics and arrogant Christians—do not acknowledge that salvation can only achieved through faith in Jesus Christ. Here Jews and bad Christians are on an equal footing, although Luther did not believe that Jews were totally cast off by God. Like Paul and the theologians of the early Church, he thought that the Jews would be converted at the Second Coming. Christians should treat Jews with patience and consideration and they should pray for them. In Dass Jesus Christus ein geborener Jude sei, [That Jesus was born a Jew] of 1523, Luther intended to convince the Jews of his time that Jesus was the promised Messiah—it was thus a sort of missionary text—but it is remarkable that Luther treats Jews with respect here and that he distances himself from the way Catholic theologians and Church politicians had treated them until then. In this respect, Catholics have been stupid asses, fools and scoundrels because:

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 . . . 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, then prophets and patriarchs.19

Although Luther repeated his stern, fierce attacks on “rabbinical theology” in texts and lectures until the late 1530s, he still maintained that Jews should be treated “kindly.” But this kindness came to an end.

In 1543 Luther published three texts, all fiercely anti-Jewish; the worst of them was *Von den Jüden und ihren Lügen*, [On the Jews and Their Lies]. In his introduction, he reports that actually he is altogether finished with concerning himself with Jews, because discussion with them is fruitless, and he no longer has any intention of trying to convert them to Christianity. In fact, it is hopeless. In the first section of the book, he states that Jews think they have a special place in the eyes of God, but Luther denies this. People, who all are sinful, have no advantages to present to God—everyone is subject to God’s condemnation. When Jews claim that circumcision is a particular sign of the covenant, Luther answers, in agreement with Paul, that the crucial matter is not physical circumcision, but is the circumcision of the heart. Nor can Jews boast of Mosaic Law; for one thing, they do not obey it, and for another, it is not the way to salvation. When Jews further assert that God has bestowed the Holy Land and the Temple upon them, Luther answers that God in His wrath has precisely taken all that away from them, because they were disobedient. Luther is extremely polemical in this chapter; he mocks Jewish prayer and rants that they are not Abraham’s but the devil’s children, that they are generally bloodthirsty, vengeful and murderous. They should be ashamed and aghast that God has damned them.

In the second part of the book, Luther goes to battle against the rabbinical interpretations of Old Testament texts about the coming of the Messiah. Interestingly, Luther does not hesitate to quote medieval Catholic theologians, and he ascertains that the rabbis simply turn God into a liar. Luther does not confine himself to theological considerations and interpretations. Again, he directs harsh accusations at the Jews as a people, and he draws diligently upon popular prejudices, rumors, superstitions and legends. He is capable of writing about: “the bottomless greed of the accursed Jews for the gold and silver of the Gentiles” and of reiterating stories of how Jews poison the wells of Christians and steal Christian children to kill them and use them for occult rites. Luther knows that he is on thin ice here, so he states that of course Jews deny all this:

However, it all coincides with the judgment of Christ, which declares that they are venomous, bitter, vindictive, tricky serpents, assassins, and children of the devil, who sting and work harm stealthily wherever they cannot do it openly.